



# HEARTS OF GREY

EARL E. GOBEL



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Earl E. Gobel

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2009906373

ISBN: Hardcover 978-1-4415-4980-8

Softcover 978-1-4415-4979-2

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This book is dedicated in loving memory of

Henry “Chuck” Charles Valencia Jr.

“Uncle Chuck”

September 5th 1951-March 23rd 2009



# Prologue

## **A novel of romance, conspiracy and jealousy**

**The year is 1864 . . . the civil war between the Union North and the Confederate South is raging onward. Despite heavy casualties, neither side will consider surrendering.**

**Meanwhile in Georgia . . . The Union Army . . . , over 65,000 strong, lead by Major General William Tecumseh Sherman is making its infamous march to the sea.**

**Total devastation is the only thing left in their wake.**

**But what happened in Columbia, South Carolina . . . will forever be etched into history as the “Greatest Crime of the War.”**

**Columbia . . . the very “Pride of the South” . . . will soon be left in complete ruins. One-third of the entire city . . . over thirty-six square city blocks will be left in a smoldering pile of ashes and rubble. And the once bustling city . . . would never be what it once was. Never!**

**The banks . . . that held the wealth of the Confederacy . . . were looted of all of their contents.**

**Years later . . . after the war, hearings would be held to find those responsible for everything that happened. Nobody would ever be convicted of any war crimes. Not even General Sherman himself. But certain names of some Union officers were stained for all eternity . . . with links back to Columbia. Their names will forever strike at the very hearts and souls of the forever loyal people of the south.**

**But in the South . . . the land of Dixie . . . there's a saying that goes "Good times are not forgotten." But the bad times are remembered just as much as the good ones . . . Some even more so.**

**Stories would be told to generations after generations about different theories of what really happen back then in Columbia.**

**But if the Union Army . . . claims that they didn't take the Gold and Money from Columbia's banks . . . and the Confederacy still claims that they were robbed . . . you have to ask yourself . . .**

**What ever happened to the "Gold of the South"?**

**Was it stolen? And if so . . . by whom? But if it wasn't stolen . . . then where is it?**

**And if there was a real treasure to be found . . . Just how much would it really be worth?**

**Would it be worth your only daughter's happiness . . . or maybe even her very life?**

**These are the questions that will have to be answered. When is the search for such things . . . no longer worth the cost of finding it? So follow along as history takes on a dark mysterious twist. One that's sure to have you rooting for the Good Guys . . . even if you can't decide who they are.**

**'Cause in the South . . . "The Hearts of Grey" is a rewrite of history.**

**Or maybe just a reconstruction of the facts . . .**

**"The Hearts of Grey . . ."**

**The South has Returned . . . or maybe it never truly left?**

# Introduction

The year is 1865. The Civil War between the states is raging on. General Sherman, along with over sixty thousand Union troops, has just forced their way into Columbia, South Carolina. By the time the sun rises the following day, Columbia would be in ruins. Three-quarters of the once-striving showcase of the South would be reduced to ashes. The pride of the South, the pride of the Confederacy, would never recover.

Meanwhile, 155 miles to the south, in the small town of Mattersonville, Georgia, fourteen men work throughout the night to unload seven overloaded wagons. The boxes are heavy, extremely heavy. When they finally finish, they quickly stash six of the wagons in a nearby cave. Then they are all executed.

Two days later, in Columbia, South Carolina, Jason Barnes, former president of the Commercial Bank of Columbia, stood inside the burned-out shell of his once-glorious bank. He was yelling and screaming about what the Union soldiers had done to his beloved town and to his bank.

“God himself will find those responsible for these unthinkable crimes against the fair people of Columbia, and his wrath will smash those thieving cowards to death in his name!” He yelled.

Just as he finished, there came a terrible rumble from behind him. He turned to see the last remaining wall of his beloved bank, the south wall, start to teeter. Then it came crashing down on him. And he screamed no more.

## Present Day, 1955

It is the second week of June, and the talk around Mattersonville, Georgia, is all about the upcoming Fourth of July picnic. There are suddenly things to do and places to go. Everyone in town has plans for the Fourth. Everyone except for Mike, that is. Born on August 1, 1932, Michael Anthony Belles is the older of two children. He is not tall, just a tad under six feet, but he is very well proportioned for his weight. Four years as

quarterback for his high school football team gave him the look that he somehow managed to keep. But then again, working on the local docks in neighboring Savannah hasn't hurt his good looks at all.

In high school, he had always been popular with the girls. But at the present time, he didn't even have a girl. Not that he couldn't have one if he really wanted one. But there just wasn't any girl in this nickel-and-dime town that even stirred his fancy. Let alone his heart.

And that's exactly what Mattersonville was—a nickel-and-dime town.

Mattersonville, Georgia is not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill southern town. In fact many people, even those in Georgia, had never even heard of it before. But there it was shining beneath the Georgia sun, basking in the ocean breezes that blew in from the coast.

Now to find this quiet little part of the south, there was no need for those fancy maps. Most likely you wouldn't find it on any of them anyway. In fact, most people who stumbled onto it did so purely by accident. Sure, the little town had all of the normal, run-of-the-mill things like any other town. But one thing it didn't have was a zip code. It just never had one and most likely never would. But it did have a post office if that made any sense. So the town would use the zip code of the closest available town—Savannah, Georgia. Now how far was Mattersonville from Savannah?

Well, just about as far as you could spit. Hell, even if you couldn't spit, for all that matter.

Directions to get there were easy. Go to Savannah, walk down the center of Main Street to where the asphalt and concrete sidewalks ends, step off onto the dirt, and you're there. In fact, many of the residents of Mattersonville would use the name Savannah as their city of residence simply because people knew where Savannah was and nobody had an idea where Mattersonville was. They still got their mail, so what was the harm in it?

Mattersonville got its name because the greatest of all of the Southern plantations was located there. Named after its founder William W. Matterson, Matterson House was huge, two stories tall with fourteen bedrooms in all. Its gleaming white pillars towered up from the large

wooden porch all the way up to a large balcony, that protruded off of the roof. The balcony was more like a big porch, surrounded by a four foot high white wooden railing. The railing ran from the roof, out one of side and across the front of the balcony, before it ran back to the roof. Two French glass doors, gave access to the balcony via the upstairs attic. In the days prior to the Civil War, it served as a city meeting place for social events for the upper-class citizens of Savannah, or for all of Georgia for that fact. But things changed after the war, as it did with most of the other cotton plantations in the South. And seven years later, following the death of his wife, Katherine, William W. Matterson himself climbed onto his favorite horse and quietly rode off into the sunset never to be heard from again. Some people will tell you that he went to California or maybe even Canada. But none of those rumors were ever proven.

But Matterson House, left abandoned and empty, soon fell victim to the passage of time. The brilliant white paint that once covered the massive house soon turned to a yellowish tinge. And the death of this great landmark destined for doom was sealed. That was until the Windslows moved into the house in 1955. Oh, there had been numerous tenants that tried to make a go of the old house, but to many, it was just too much work. But none of them had the dream of rebuilding her as Grady did. One of those past occupants had even gone as far as building a large barn and stables. And while the structure wasn't a part of the original structure, it was still a very sturdy barn, and while it only needed a coat of paint, Grady still hadn't decided to keep it or tear it down. Had it been built a little farther from the house, there would simply be no decision to be made. That same tenant had even made an attempt at adding some indoor plumbing. And while it wasn't nearly enough, it still was a lot better than the outdoor outhouses of the past. The hot water heater wasn't large enough to heat the kitchen sink. So the first thing that Grady had added was a larger unit, to handle the task at hand. The entire property sat on about two hundred acres of plush green pastureland. The gravel driveway that entered through two large stone-covered pillars ran about one hundred yards before it reached the circular portion of the driveway in front of the porch that led to the front doors of this once-grand old house. Looking away from the house, a flat

pasture stretched out for several hundred yards before they ended at the base of the hill that surrounded the town of Mattersonville.

Grady Windslow had brought two things with him when he moved into the huge house—his charming twenty-year-old daughter, Katie, and a secret that went back to the war itself, a secret that they would have to keep to themselves until they had all of the pieces to the puzzle.

# Girl Problems

Saturday was just another day. Michael and his best friend, Rick, had just finished their shift at the dock where they had spent the last ten hours loading and unloading the ships that called the port of Savannah home. It might not be the most sought-after job in the world, but still it was an honest job, and the pay was decent. And like any other Saturday in this two-bit town, their nightlife would consist of a stop off at the local soda fountain for a fast bite to eat, then it was home for a shower then off to the movies. For every Saturday night, the theater would change the picture show. This week would be no different.

As they took their seats at the booth by the window, Rick asked the same question that he had asked for the past three weeks. "So who are you taking to the Fourth of July picnic?" he asked.

"Jesus, don't you ever quit? I told you before I'm not going," Mike replied.

"Why not? Hey, why don't you ask Betty? She'll go with you I bet."

"Lay off. When I find just the right girl, I'll let you know, okay?" Mike replied.

"The right girl? I told you before, she doesn't exist. How about Susie Barnes? She just broke up with her boyfriend I hear," Rick answered.

"Susie Barnes, are you kidding? Besides I might have to work," Mike answered.

Floe, the waitress, walked up to their table with her ticket book in hand, ready to jot down their order. "What's it going to be this time, guys, the usual?" she asked.

"Floe, how about a girlfriend for Mike here?" Rick asked. "He's lonely."

"Rick, quit it. Floe, tell him that true love is worth waiting for, isn't it?" Mike said.

“Son, you’re asking the wrong person. I’ve been waiting for years, and look at me, I still live with my parents, and I’m closing in on twenty-five,” she told him.

“See, Mike, you need to broaden your horizons, is all.”

“I’ll take a burger and fries and a malted, but take him with you,” Mike said as he pointed at Rick.

Floe just smiled. “And you?” she asked.

“Yeah, give me the usual,” Rick told her.

Floe scribbled their orders down and went to put their order in.

“Hey, you can take Floe,” Rick said as he started laughing.

“Oh yeah, an older woman, that would go over good tomorrow at church I bet,” Mike answered.

“Yeah, I can just picture your mom dragging you from church by your earlobe,” Rick added.

“Well, I don’t think she would go that far, but—” Mike answered as Rick cut him off.

“Oh yeah, she would. We’re talking about your mom, remember?”

“Yeah maybe she would at that,” Mike responded.

Just then, Mr. Petersen stopped in front of their table. “Hello, Michael, tell your dad that I just got the lumber in for his barn. I’ll deliver it on Monday. Okay?” he asked.

“Sure thing, Mr. Petersen, I’ll be sure to tell him when I go home,” Mike answered.

“Hello there, Rick. Hey, that job offer is still open if you want to get off of that dock,” Mr. Petersen told Rick.

“Still thinking about it but haven’t made up my mind yet,” he answered.

“Won’t be around forever, you know?”

“I know,” Rick answered.

“Good day to you, boys, got to run. My food is getting cold,” Mr. Petersen told them as he walked away.

“You, guys, planning on fixing your barn?” Rick asked.

“My dad wants to replace the south wall. Ain’t nothing wrong with it, just old I guess,” Mike answered.

“So let’s get back to your problem,” Rick said as he sat up straight in the booth.

“What problem?” Mike asked as if he didn’t already know the answer.

“Your girl problem,” Rick answered.

“For the last time, I don’t have a girl problem,” Mike answered in a louder-than-normal tone.

Both of them kind of looked around to see how many people were staring at them. And as usual, everyone had stopped eating and was staring at them. Then they all went back to whatever they were doing before.

“Thanks, Rick,” Mike told him as he slid down deeper into the booth.

“See, now everyone knows that you have a girl problem,” Rick answered as Floe walked up with their orders. Neither of them spoke as she slid their plates down in front of them.

“There you go, boys. Eat hearty,” Floe said as she turned and walked away.

“Hey, there’s talk around town that somebody bought the old Matterson place,” said Rick as he bit into his sandwich.

“The old Matterson place you say? That place is a dump. Remember when we used to play in that creepy old place?” Mike replied.

“I remember when a certain someone fell through the floor.”

“Hey, don’t laugh. I really thought I was going to die that day. One minute I’m chasing after you—”

“Yeah, then you were gone. Nothing but a big hole in the floor. That was funny,” Rick added.

“Funny now maybe, but back then—what was I, maybe eight—stuff like that has a way of scaring people for life,” Mike responded.

“Scaring you for life? You were back the next day doing it again,” Rick said with a laugh.

Mike looked up at the clock. “Look what time it is. We’ve got to go if we want to see that movie,” Mike said as he crammed the last few fries into this mouth. They dropped a few bucks on the table and shot out the door. “I’ll meet you in the same place out in front!” Mike yelled at Rick as the two ran off in different directions.

As Mike ran into his house, the screen door slammed behind him.

“Michael, is that you?” yelled his mother from the kitchen.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

“Get yourself in here and give your mama a hug,” she yelled. He entered the kitchen to find his mom standing over the stove, cooking beans again. He walked up and gave her a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Where you off to in such a big hurry?” she asked.

“I’m meeting Rick over at the theater house, Mama, just like I do every Saturday,” he answered.

“I don’t think the Lord would look down kindly on you for going there. All they show is guys and girls kissing and all,” she said, which happened to be the very same word-for-word line that she used every Saturday or whenever the topic got brought up—usually by her.

“It’s only a picture show, Mama, and besides, what’s wrong with kissing?” he asked. “You and Pa do it all the time.”

“We be married folk, Michael. There’s some things that a proper woman shouldn’t do until she’s wed,” she answered.

“Maybe so, Mama, but don’t worry, I don’t think there’s a girl in this town that’s worth kissing anyways,” Mike told her.

“Well, see that you don’t. The good Lord is watching over you,” she told him.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve got to go take a shower,” he told her.

“Ain’t no hot water, did the washing today,” she told him.

“Mama, again! Can’t you do washing on Friday?” he asked her.

“No, Friday is pie-cooking day. Saturday is washing day, always has been, always will be,” she told him.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What ya need a shower for anyways?” she asked him. “It’s just a picture show.”

“Because I stink, Mama. I’m sweaty and hot, and I stink,” he told her.

“Ain’t nothing wrong with a man sweating. It means that he’s a hard worker. Yep, that’s the way I figure it,” she told him.

Mike knew that he was on the losing side of the argument, so he bowed down and quietly went to take a shower, a very cold shower. After he had finished with his shower, he got dressed. He grabbed his boots and walked back to the kitchen.

“Mama, did you wash my socks?” he asked her.

She just turned and looked at him.

“Son, didn’t I just tell you not ten minutes ago that today was washing day? Can’t be washing day if I didn’t do the washing now, would it?” she answered.

“Guess not,” he answered.

“Walk yourself out yonder and fetch them off of the line,” she told him.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he headed for the door. He felt the socks that hung from the line.

“Oh great, wet socks. Just perfect,” he said as he pulled two of the driest socks from the line. He sat down on the front porch and pulled on his damp socks and then his boots.

Mike got to the picture house before Rick did. As normal, he just stood there waiting. He was looking at the postings for next week’s picture show,

but as he turned the corner, he came face-to-face with the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Frozen in time, they just stared at each other for what seemed as if minutes but was truthfully only a few seconds.

She was everything that he had ever dreamed of. She stood only a tad taller than his shoulders, but she was one of those girls that could make a guy's blood boil without even trying. Her hair was honeysuckle in color and encircled her face with beautiful full-body curls. Her hair hung down to her near-perfect waist. But what caught his attention were her eyes. They were the brightest and bluest eyes Mike had ever seen, ever, and those lashes so rich, so full—they were captivating in their own right. And her cute sexy lips, they were the perfect finishing touch to the masterpiece of living, walking art. Yes, God was truly a genius when he made this one for sure. And there was this mystic aroma filling the air, all around her. Mike just stood there, taking it all in. That is, until he realized that he was staring, and he returned to the real world.

“Uuuuhhh, oh, I’m sorry,” he said with his eyes never leaving hers. “I’m truly sorry,” he told her.

“It’s quiet all right, no serious harm done,” she answered. Mike hadn’t even seen Susie Barnes who was with the young lady.

“Well, Michael, aren’t you even going to say hi?” she asked.

“Oh, hi, Susie,” he said without turning away from the girl that stood before him.

“Michael, look at me when you talk to me,” she demanded.

He turned and looked at Susie. “Hi, Susie, who’s your friend?” he asked.

“Just a friend. Hey, nobody has asked me to the Fourth of July dance yet, in case you were wonderin’,” she told him.

“That’s too bad, Susie,” he told her. He just stared at the girl. “Hi, I’m Michael, but my friends just call me Mike.”

“Hi, Mike, I’m Katie, and my friends call me Katie,” she told him.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss,” he said to her.

“Please call me Katie,” she told him.

“Well, I guess that makes us friends then, doesn’t it?” he told her.

“Well, I guess it does at that,” she said with a smile.

Susie was getting jealous in a hurry. She had always liked Mike, and the whole town knew it. And now this girl was invading what she thought was going to be hers. “Hey, Katie, we need to go. The picture is about to start,” she said as she pulled Katie along by the arm.

“I’ll be seeing you around, Katie,” Mike told her.

“I’m sure that you will,” she said as Susie pulled her into the movie house. Mike just stood there, locked in the moment. He didn’t even notice Rick as he walked up to him.

“Hey, sorry I’m late,” Rick told him.

Mike just turned and grabbed Rick by the shoulders. “I’ve found her!” he yelled at Rick.

“Found who? What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

“Her name is Katie, and she’s the most beautiful girl that I’ve ever seen,” Mike told him.

“Who?” Rick asked again as he watched Mike as he was spinning around in circles with his arms waving all over the place. “Mike, stop it, people are going to think that you’ve been dipping into old man Miller’s moonshine again.”

“I don’t care what people think. I’m in love,” Mike told him.

“In love? Who is this mysterious girl? When did you meet her?” he asked.

“Just a few minutes ago. She’s in the movie house with Susie. Come on, we’ve got to hurry so we can sit next to her. Come on, Rick, you’re as slow as molasses in December!” he yelled as he pulled at his arm.

“I’m coming. Slow down. She ain’t going anywheres!” Rick yelled in protest. As they entered the darkened picture show, Mike searched the seats for Katie or Susie. When he found them, he was disappointed to find that

there wasn't any empty seats anywhere near them. So they had to take seats halfway across the theater from them. *Might as well be in another country*, Mike thought to himself.

# A Chance Encounter

Susie sat next to Katie filling her head with lies.

“So who’s this guy?” Katie asked.

“Which guy?” Susie asked even when she knew darn well who Katie was referring to.

“That hunk that I met outside. You know, Mike?” she asked.

“Oh, him, he’s my beau,” she answered.

“He didn’t act like a beau! Especially with those eyes,” she told her.

“Yeah well, we’re kind of going steady, but he’s kind of nervous about it,” Susie poured it on.

“Steady? So are you promised, you know, with a ring ’cause I see that you’re not wearing one,” Katie added.

“Well, the one that he gave me doesn’t fit, so I can’t wear it,” Susie told her.

“I would at least wear it around my neck on a chain or something,” Katie replied.

“Oh, you would, would you? Well when and if you do get a boyfriend, I’ll watch for it. But until then, I’d suggest that you just watch the movie,” Susie told her.

“Oh my, touchy, are we? Relax, I’m not looking to steal him away from you anyhow. But I’ll bet you I could—I mean if I really wanted to you know,” Katie answered.

Susie didn’t answer her because she knew deep down in her heart that she could steal Mike from her with little or no effort especially since there was nothing going on between the two of them anyway. But she too had seen how he stared at her.

When the picture show was over, Mike was the very first person outside. He stood there waiting for Katie. When she and Susie came outside, Mike was there to meet them.

“Hello, Katie,” Mike said.

“Well, hello there, Mike, nice to see you again,” she told him. Susie just threw Katie a nasty look. “Mike, aren’t you going to say hi to your girlfriend?” she asked as she pulled Susie her arm.

“Girlfriend? Susie is a friend, that’s all. Ain’t that right, Susie?” he asked her. But Susie didn’t respond.

“Have you been filling this girl’s head with your lies? Hell, ya already told the whole town that we was courting and all,” he asked her again. “Susie, now tell Katie here the truth,” he demanded.

“Oh, all right. I lied. We ain’t boyfriend and girlfriend, but we should have been,” she told Katie.

“See, now that didn’t hurt a bit now, did it, sugar?” Katie asked Susie. Susie just turned and ran away.

“Well, I do declare whatever made her run away like that?” Katie asked.

“If you knew Susie, you wouldn’t ask,” Mike told her. “Hey, Katie, I’d be honored if you would allow me to buy you a malted over at the soda fountain,” he added.

“Right now? How sweet you are, but I promised my daddy that I would be home straight after the picture show,” she replied.

“Well then, may I have the honor of walking ya home then?” Mike asked her.

“But what about your friend? I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Rick, my name is Rick. Rick McIntosh,” he answered her. He too was in total awe at just the sight of her.

“Well, glad to meet you, Rick. My friends call me Katie. Would you like to help your friend walk me home?” she asked. Rick saw the look on

Mike's face.

"I really do wish that I could, but I promised my mama the same thing that you promised your daddy, so I'll catch the two of you later," he said as he turned and walked away, looking back at her often.

"Well, I guess it's just you and I then. Shall we? You know how to get to the Matterson House, don't you?" she asked.

"You moved into that old . . . house? Mighty fine place," he told her.

"Oh, be honest! The place is a wreck. But my daddy will have it fixed up in no time. He's quite good at fixin' things that need fixing," she told him. "You know that right in the middle of my bedroom, right where my bed is supposed to be, there's a hole clear through to the floor below. Looks like someone might have fell through it," she added.

"No kidding! Clear through you say? Well, imagine that," he said with a devilish grin.

About five minutes into their walk to her house, he was taken totally by surprise when she reached down and took his hand in hers. The fifteen-minute walk took them over an hour. He'd stop and pick flowers for her, and she would let him put them in her hair. As the two of them walked up onto the porch of her house, Mike was startled to find her daddy sitting in a rocker, hidden by the night's shadows.

"Katie, who's this young man that thinks it appropriate to be holding my little girl's hand?" he asked. Mike let go of Katie's hand without thinking twice about it.

"Daddy, this here is Michael. He was kind enough to walk me home, Daddy," she answered.

"Oh, he did, did he? What in the darn blazes is that in your hair, child?" he asked pointing to the flowers.

"They're just flowers, Daddy, just flowers, that's all," she told him.

"And you let him stick those flowers in your hair, did ya? What's the matter, boy? Can't you talk for yourself?" he asked.

“Uhhh, yes, sir. Glad to meet you, sir,” Mike answered him as he held out his hand in a gesture of friendship.

“Never cared for shaking a man’s hand. Tells me nothing about a man other than he has sweaty hands. Are you a good man son, you work?”

“Yes, sir, I work down at the docks,” Mike answered him.

“You believe in God, son?” he asked.

“Oh yes, sir, go to church every Sunday,” Mike replied.

“So do you fancy my daughter there?” he asked.

“Fancy? Are you asking me if I like her? The answer would be yes, sir,” Mike answered.

“Well, if you’re a hardworking man and you believe in God, then I guess you’re okay in my book, son. Come on up here and sit a spell, why don’t ya?” he said as he offered Mike a chair next to his.

“Daddy, you didn’t have to scare him like that,” she told her dad.

“Oh, relax, Katie dear. I was just fooling with the boy,” he said as he turned to face Mike.” Tell me though, did I have you scared or what?” he asked

“Oh yeah, I was scared all right,” he answered.

“That’s okay, Mike. Most of the time, he’s holding a shotgun. Went and scared the hell out of two boys that came a—callin’ a while back,” she told him.

“Yeah, and that one kid never touched a single step as he flew off of the porch of our old place,” the old man added.

“Well, I pretty much had the same idea a few minutes ago, sir,” Mike confessed to the old man.

“Yeah, but ya didn’t. That tells me that you have guts and a backbone, son. Mighty good qualities to have. But I can tell you that you don’t love Katie. Want to know how I know that?” the old man asked.

“Well, I just met her tonight,” Mike replied.

“Maybe so, but you felt comfortable enough to hold her hand and put flowers in her hair. Mighty brazin’ for just meeting her if you ask me. But you don’t love her, do you?” the old man asked again.

“Well, I guess not, not yet anyways. I mean there’s still tomorrow. But I’ll ask how you knew that I don’t love her now,” Mike replied.

“Because when a man truly loves a woman, the only time he’ll ever let go of her hand, son, is when he’s either working to support her or protecting her or defending her honor. You remember that, and you’ll never have to prove your love to anyone ever again. Be it my Katie here or some other lady.”

“Daddy, now you’re scaring him,” she offered up to her father.

“Relax, Katie. Why don’t you fetch us menfolk something to drink? You like tea, Michael?” he asked.

“Tea would be fine. I’m sorry, I never got your name,” Mike said in a questionable tone.

“Grady, Old Man Grady. That’s what everyone calls me. And more than likely what they’ll put on my headstone someday I reckon.”

“Grady it is then,” Mike told him.

“Might as well call me that since I don’t bother answering too much to anything else.

Katie soon returned with three glasses of tea, and for the next hour or so, Mike listened as Grady filled Mike in on all of Katie’s most embarrassing mishaps of her life.

“What you say if I told you that when Katie here was about five or so, I reckoned she fell in love with cooking. She’d cook anything and everything just as long as it was made out of mud. Yeah, mud pies,” Grady told him.

“Oh really, mud pies?” Mike asked. “Please go on?”

“Oh yeah, I reckon she liked them so much we had mud pies everywhere. Then my little missy here got all upset because nobody ever ate one. So I told her, why don’t you eat one?” he rambled on.

“And . . . did she?” he asked.

“Sure did, just one bite that stayed in her mouth a whole ten seconds or so, I reckon. Then she spit it out, and that, my dear boy, was the last of her mud pie fixation,” he said as he looked over at Katie.

“Oh, Daddy, it wasn’t like that at all! I think you’re stretching it a tad or two,” she told him.

“Well, I was there, and I remember it all, I reckon,” he told her.

“Sir, I’d love to sit here and listen to your stories, but I really need to be going. It’s getting late, and church is tomorrow morning. Wouldn’t want to miss that,” Mike said as he stood up to leave.

“Well, ya welcome to visit anytime you get the hankering to,” the old man told him.

“Daddy, can I walk him to the wall?” Katie asked.

“Well, I figure that you’re going to anyhow, so ya might as well,” he told her.

So Katie walked Mike to the fence at the edge of the yard.

“Your Dad is darn right funny,” he told her.

“Ah, he’s harmless. He’s getting up in the years, so I reckon it makes a person slow down a tad,” she replied.

“Katie, I really like you, and I’d like to see you again. How would that be?” he asked.

“Why, Michael, I think that would be just grand,” she replied.

“Tomorrow after church?” he asked.

“Well, we might not make church tomorrow. With all of the unpacking and all,” she explained.

“Well, that’s okay. God will understand, I think,” he told her.

“Well then, I’ll be seeing you after church then,” she told him.

“I reckon you will,” he said as his face drew closer to hers. She even turned her head a bit, but he pulled away at the last minute. “I reckon I’d better be going,” he said as he turned to walk away.

“See ya tomorrow!” she yelled as he walked away.

All the way home, he was whistling as he walked along without a care in his head.

As he came through the front door, his mother met him halfway. “Where ya been?” she asked.

“Mama, I met a girl. She’s the most beautiful thing that I’ve ever seen, Mama.”

“Ya said that ya was going to that picture show,” she answered.

“I did, Mama. That’s where I met her,” he told her.

“She a local girl?” she asked.

“No, she just moved into the old Matterson place. Mama, wait until you meet her. She’s just . . . well she makes me want to tell everyone about her,” he told her.

“Well, maybe at church tomorrow,” she replied.

“Uuhh, she might not make church tomorrow,” he told her.

“Ain’t going to church? Aw hell, child, I don’t much like her much already, ain’t going to church and all,” she answered.

“Well, it’s just that they just moved in and all. They still be unpacking and all,” he told her.

“Well, there’s always time for the Lord’s Word, unpacking or not,” she told him.

“Well, I’m going to bed. I’m tired. Good night, Mama,” he said as he went upstairs.

# First Church Sunday

Sunday's sunrise could not have come any earlier. Mike dressed in his very best Sunday go-to-meetings clothes. He ran downstairs and greeted his father with a smile.

"Good morning, Pa," he said to his dad as he drank his morning coffee.

"Good morning to you, Michael. What's gotten into you this fine Sunday morning?" his father asked.

"I met this girl yesterday, been thinking about her all night," he told him.

"Well, I guess she must be something special to get ya all wound up," his father replied.

"Oh yeah, Mr. Petersen will deliver your wood for the barn tomorrow. He asked me to tell ya," Mike said.

"That will be fine. I could use your help fixing the barn," he told him.

"Sure, just let me know when, and I'll help ya. That goes without saying, Pa," Mike told him. He turned and looked at his parents. "I'll see you at church, got to go fetch something that needs to be fetched," he told them.

"You best not be late, child," his mother warned.

"I won't!" he yelled as he ran from the house with the screen door slamming behind him.

There wasn't anything that needed fetchin'. But Mike wanted to be there at church just in case Katie did show up.

Over at the old Matterson House, Katie walked down the stairs. Her father watched as she graced each and every step as she slowly made it to the bottom of the staircase.

"Wow, Katie darling, your mother would be so proud. Just look at you all dressed up for church. You certainly are a sight to behold," he told her.

“You really think so?” she asked.

“Well, of course I do. You’re my only daughter, ain’t ya? But I do need to ask you a question. Are you going to church to praise God or stir up the devil in that young boy from last night?” he asked.

“Daddy? I’m going to praise God of course, but if Mike is there, what’s the harm of that?” she asked.

“Well, because God’s house is for giving thanks to God, not for exciting the devil,” he told her.

“Daddy, I don’t think Michael needs any help. Certainly not from the devil himself. He’s a gentleman through and through. He proved that last night,” she told him.

“And just how did he prove it, may I ask?” he asked her.

“Last night at the fence, Daddy, I wanted him to kiss me just to see what it would really be like. But he pulled away, Daddy, just like the true gentleman he is,” she answered.

“Now, Katie, when a lady moves to fast, especially on the first meeting, people might prejudice you with the mark of a scarlet,” he warned her.

“Daddy, just because a lady such as myself happens to fall in love doesn’t mean that she’s a scarlet herself,” she replied.

“Certainly not, but people jump to judgments without the thinking of their brains. They see with their eyes, Katie, not with their hearts. That’s just people being people, I reckon.”

“You going to church, Daddy?” she asked.

“Naw, I talked to God last night as I read from the Good Book. I reckon God knows my thoughts on the matter. Ya don’t have to go to his house to believe. But you do have to invite him into yours. That’s the way I figure it. And if God hadn’t approved, I reckon he would have let me know long before now. But you can still put in a good word for me if you get a chance. Can’t hurt me any,” he told her.

“I will, Daddy, and I’ll say a prayer for Mama too. Daddy, you think she’s an angel by now?” she asked.

“Katie, your mother was an angel here on earth, and the good Lord called her away for his own reasons, but it wouldn’t surprise me one bit to find out that she ran the place. You best be off to church now. ‘Wouldn’t want you to be late now, would we?’” he told her.

“Bye, Daddy,” she said as she gave him a fast kiss on the cheek. And she was gone.

Mike was just about to give up all hopes when down the road, he spotted her walking. He ran up to meet her. As he got closer, he just stopped dead in his tracks.

“Why, Ms. Katie, just look at you all dressed up and all. I think I might be in the presence of an angel?” he told her.

“Michael, are you trying to flatter me? You look mighty handsome yourself in your Sunday go-to-meetin’ suit,” she added.

He held out his arm. “May I have the honor of escorting you into our fine house of worship?” he asked.

“You certainly may indeed, sir,” she said as she took his arm.

As they walked arm in arm up the cobblestone walk that led to the front entrance of the church, everyone stopped and stared, but nobody stared any harder than Susie Barnes was staring. As they entered the church, they were greeted by Father Mathews.

“Good morning, Michael, glad to see you this morning, and who is this charming lady, may I ask?”

“Father, this is Katie. Katie—?”

“Windslow, Katie Windslow,” she jumped in to save him.

“Well, Ms. Windslow, it’s an honor to have you with us here today. I hope you enjoy the sermon,” he told her.

“I’m certain that I will, and thank you,” she answered. Katie and Mike made their way into the church. They took up seats next to his parents.

Throughout the entire sermon, Katie impressed both Mike and his parents. She knew every hymn, and she sang with the voice of an angel.

And her voice was clearly heard above everyone else's. And as she sang, Michael found himself falling deeper and deeper in love with her. After church, Mike formally introduced Katie to his parents.

"Father, Mother, I'd like you to meet Katie Windslow," he said as introduced her.

"Michael, when you said she was beautiful, you weren't kidding. Glad to meet you Katie, I'm Frank, Frank Gibbes, and this lovely lady to my right is my wife, Annabelle."

"Well, it's certainly a pleasure to meet you both," Katie answered.

"Ms. Windslow, do I detect a southern accent?" asked Mike's mother.

"Well, I was raised in Mobile, Alabama," Katie answered.

"I thought I recognized it," Annabelle answered.

Just then, Father Mathews walked up to them. "Morning, Frank, Annabelle. I was wondering if I might have a talk with Ms. Windslow, if I may?" he asked.

"Sure, would you like us to leave you two alone?" Frank asked.

"Oh, no need, I just wanted to ask Ms. Windslow if she would consider singing a solo next week. Your voice, I've never heard anything like it. It's truly heaven-sent. So how 'bout it?" he asked her.

"A solo, all by myself? Oh, I don't know if I could. I just close my eyes and sing," she answered him.

"Your voice rang above everyone else's. Everyone heard it. I've already had two people ask about it," he told her.

"Already? Well, how about you give me a week to think about it?" she asked.

"Great, you pick the hymn, and I'll set it up. And may I also ask you how did you like my sermon?" he asked her.

"I really enjoyed it. I like the way you bring the entire congregation into it. Most interesting indeed," she answered.

“Well, I’m glad you enjoyed it. Think about my offer, will you?” he asked.

“I will, Father. I promise,” she told him.

“Great, I look forward to next Sunday then. I’ll leave you all alone now. Good day to you, ladies. Gentlemen,” he said as he turned and walked away.

“There goes a very nice man and a great pastor,” Katie said as he walked away.

“Yeah, so are you going to sing next Sunday?” Michael asked.

“Mike? I said I would think about it,” she answered.

“Well, I was standing next to you, and I really think you should,” Mike said.

“Now, Michael, the lady said that she would think about it. So let her do just that. She will if the Lord wants her to,” his father added.

“Why, thank you, Mr. Gibbes. It’s so nice of you to be so supportive,” Katie said.

“So what do you kids have planned for the rest of the day?” Annabelle asked.

“Well, I’m certain that Katie will want to get out of that fancy dress, but after that, I don’t know,” Mike answered.

“I remember someone inviting a certain someone else to a trip to the soda fountain,” Katie replied.

# For Your First Love

“Well, there you have it, Mom, we’re going to the soda fountain I guess,” Mike said. “But I really need to talk with you two before you leave, so, Katie, would you mind if I talk to my parents alone for a minute?” he asked her.

“Sure, I’ll just wait over there under that tree,” she said as she started walking away.

“I’ll only be a minute,” he told her before he turned back to his parents. “So what do you think?” he asked.

“Sounds to me as a very nice young girl,” his mom replied.

“I think she a great catch. Nice, charming, but since when do you care what we think?” his father asked.

“Since I want to give this to her,” Mike said as he pulled the object from his pocket.

“Your grandma’s wedding ring?” his mother asked.

“Grandpa gave it to me before he died and asked that I give it to my first love. Remember?” he asked.

“I know what he told you, son, but you just met her yesterday. Don’t you think you’re rushing things a bit?” his mother asked.

“Maybe, but sometimes you just know that it’s right. You know in your heart,” he told her.

“Son, Grandpa passed that ring down to you so you could give it to your first love. But only you could know who that special someone is. So who are we to pass judgment on your heart’s decision? If you feel that she’s the one, then by all means go ahead and give it to her,” his father told him.

“But, Frank, it’s too soon,” Annabelle replied.

“I frankly remember another young boy and girl that fell in love after their first date. And I think we’ve been very happy ever since. Wouldn’t you

agree?” he asked her.

“Frank, you do remember. It’s been a long time. Your father is right, son. Go ahead. Let God guide you,” she told him.

“Thanks, Mom and Dad, I knew what you would say. That’s why I brought it,” he told them.

“Pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you, son?” he yelled to his son as he ran over to where Katie was waiting. Katie and Michael waved good-bye as they started walking down the road to her house.

“So what do you want to do?” she asked as they slowly walked down the gravel road to her house.

“I thought you wanted to go to the soda fountain?” he replied.

“Silly, I’m not talking about today or tomorrow. I’m talking with the rest of your life,” she said.

“Never gave it much thought, I reckon. Why do you ask?”

“Because there’s a whole world out there just waiting to be explored, and I want to see it all,” she told him.

“All of it? That’s a lot of traveling,” he told her.

“I’m not saying that we have to do it all in a day, but within our lifetime. How’s that sound?” she asked.

“That might be a tad bit excitin’. Expensive but nice,” he answered.

“What if money weren’t the problem? Would you do it?” she asked.

“Sure, I reckon I would but only under one condition,” he told her.

“And what might that be?” she asked.

“That wherever I go, regardless of where it is or for how long, I’ll always have you at my side,” he told her.

“Well, well, moving kind of fast, aren’t we? I mean we just met each other yesterday,” she replied.

“Doesn’t matter. I fell in love with you yesterday at the movie house,” he told her.

“But, Michael—” she stopped herself. “Excuse me, what did you just say?” she asked.

“I said that I fell in love with you yesterday at the movie house,” he told her again.

“So it wasn’t just me. I mean you felt it too?” she asked. “That’s weird, tinkling down in the pit of your stomach.”

He stopped walking and turned her to face him. He took her hand in his and placed it over his heart. “No, I felt it here,” he told her.

She started to cry. “Michael, that is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. You really mean it?” she asked.

“Yes I do, with every bit of my heart,” he said.

She threw her arms around his neck, and as he wrapped his arms around her waist, the two of them spun around in circles.

“Come on, we’ve got to tell my daddy,” she cried.

“No, not yet. There’s more,” he told her.

“More? I’m not sure I can take much more. You’ve already made me cry. What would you like me to do next?” she asked.

As he slid his grandmother’s ring on to her finger, he said, “Be my girl.”

She just stood there, staring at the huge stone that he had slid on to her finger.

“It belonged to my grandmother. My grandfather passed it on to me, and now I give it you with all of my heart,” he told her.

“Michael, I don’t know what to say. I wasn’t expecting this, not at all,” she told him.

“Well, you could start off by saying yes. That might be a good starting point,” he told her.

“Well, of course the answer is yes. Don’t be silly,” she said as she threw her arms around his neck again.

“Okay, relax, you’re choking me!” he told her as he pulled her arms from his neck.

“Okay, sorry, I got carried away. Now can we go tell my daddy?” she asked.

“Yes, now we can go tell your daddy. But there’s one thing that we have to do first,” he told her.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I’ll show you before we get there. Trust me, okay?” he told her.

“You know that I do,” she told him.

Together they strolled down the road toward her house. As they walked through the gate, he reached over and took her hand in his. He gave a tight but fast squeeze to her hand. And without a word, she knew what he meant.

As they walked up onto the porch, her father came out of the house. “Well, hey there, youngin’s. How was church?” he asked.

“Just fine, Mr. Grady,” Mike told him.

“It’s just Grady, son. Ain’t no mister to it,” he replied.

“Yes, sir,” Mike replied.

“Daddy, look what Mike gave me,” she said as she held out her hand that Mike was still holding on to.

“Well, lookie there, you’ve got a ring. Wow, that’s a biggie, biggest one that I can recall ever seein’, I reckon,” the old man said as he stared at the ring on his daughter’s finger.

“Michael gave it to me,” she told him.

“Now, Katie, such useless talk like that there just don’t need to be said. I reckon the hold that this young man has on your hand pretty much tells the story, I reckon,” he told her.

“It used to be his grandma’s, but he wanted me to have it,” she told him.

Grady just looked at Michael.

“Is that the way that you’d be telling it, son?” he asked.

“Well, yes, sir. My grandpa told me to give it to my first love, so I did just that when I slid it on to Katie’s finger,” he answered.

“Just hold on there one darn minute. Are you tellin’ me that you love my daughter here, my one and only daughter? Is that what you’d be sayin’?” he asked in a very questionable tone.

“Yes, sir, I am. I know that we’ve just met, but—”

“Hold on there, son,” Grady said cutting him off. “You say that you love my Katie, so you gave her a ring. So have you kissed her yet?” he asked.

“Daddy?” Katie jumped in.

“No, it’s all right, Katie,” Mike told her. “If you’re asking if I love your daughter, the answer would be yes. But if you’re asking me if I’ve kissed her, the answer would be no, sir,” he told him.

“Why not? You’re a good strong healthy boy, and she’s a pretty young girl. So again, the question would be why haven’t you kissed her yet?” Grady asked.

“Because I respect her!” he responded.

“Respect her? Is that the only reason you can conjure up?” Grady asked.

“It’s the only reason I need, sir,” Michael responded in a fairly heated tone.

“Daddy, quit it. If that’s the only reason that he has, then that’s good for me, Daddy,” Katie told him.

“Relax, Katie dear, just testin’ the boy. And like I said the other evenin’, he’s got a backbone,” he told her. “And I noticed that not once did he ever let go of your hand,” he said as he held out his hand and took

Michael's free hand. "Good job! You stand up for what you believe in. That's a darn good quality to have, I reckon."

Mike shook Grady's hand, and soon a smile came over his face. "A test you say?" Michael asked.

"She's my only daughter, son, so it's my job to protect her, I reckon," he answered.

"Well, you just keep on testing me any chance you get. Katie knows how I feel, and I'm sure that when the time is right, I'll be doing a whole lot of kissing," Mike told him.

"You know that there might be things that ya might not want to be tellin' a girl's father. And I suspect that jus' might be one of those," Grady told Mike.

"I meant you no disrespect, sir," Mike said.

"Son, had I thought that for one minute you were being disrespectful, you'd be dustin' off the seat of your trousers," he told him.

"I'll try to remember that," Mike told him.

"You best if you know what's good for ya," Grady told him with a huge smile on his face.

"Okay, you two, if you're finished deciding who's testin' who, I'm going to change. Mike is taking me to the soda fountain," Katie told them as she disappeared into the house. Mike and Grady sat down in the chairs on the porch. Mike sat there quietly and was staring at the house that needed a lot of work to make it what it once was.

"So tell me, son, what do you think of this old house?" Grady asked.

"Needs a lot of work, sir, but it's worth the effort I guess," Mike replied.

"You guess? Son, you any idea as to the history of this old house?" he asked.

"Just what I've heard, a bunch of southern folklore or stories I guess," Mike answered.

“Son, this old house used to be the pride of the South. A huge place with over fourteen rooms and even slave quarters. Yes, sir, in her day, she was a masterpiece. A cotton plantation that had no rival,” he told him.

“Really? I never knew,” Mike answered.

“Oh yeah, and someday, I’ll finish all of the repairs and have her back in all of her raging glory,” Grady said with a tone of unmistakable southern pride.

“Well if you ever need some help, I’ll be there when you need me,” Mike told him.

“I was hoping that you would say that,” Grady told him.

Mike just gave him a cautious look of concern as Katie came outside. Mike and Grady both stood up as she came outside.

“Wow, Katie, that was fast,” Mike told her. “You look simply smashing.”

“Well, all I did was change dresses. Ain’t no magic to it,” she told him.

“So you two are going to the soda fountain? Well, you all have a great time,” Grady told them.

“Oh, Daddy, you worry too much. We’re only going for a malted,” Katie told him.

“Maybe so, but ya went to church and came back with a ring on your finger, didn’t ya?” Grady asked.

“It’s okay, Katie, he’s just protecting you. That’s all,” Mike told her.

She couldn’t argue with him because he was right.

# In Her Face

Katie gave her daddy a hug and a kiss good-bye. And with that, the two lovebirds walked hand in hand out of the gate, headed for the soda fountain. As they walked along, their conversation was filled with a bunch of small talk.

“So did you mean what you told, Daddy?” she asked.

“Which part?” Mike asked.

“About the kiss, you know the respect part,” she said.

“Yeah sure, why do you ask?” he asked.

“Well, I thought it was sweet and all, but—” she stopped halfway through her sentence.

“But what? What are you asking me?” he asked.

They stopped and turned facing each other.

“Just how many girls, you know?” she asked.

“How many girls?” he asked as he tried to figure out what she was asking.

“You know, kissed?” she asked.

“Are you asking me how many girls have I kissed?” he asked.

“Well yeah, I was just wonderin’,” she said.

“I don’t know. Uhhh, how many guys have you kissed?” he asked.

“Just a few. But most of them kissed me first,” she told him. “Why? Does it matter?”

“No, not at all,” he told her.

“So how many?” she asked again.

“Well, are you asking me how many I’ve kissed, or how many girls have kissed me?” he asked.

Then Katie started laughing.

“What are you laughing at?” he asked.

“Michael, tell me the truth. You have never kissed a girl before, have you?” she asked.

“Well, on the lips?” he asked again.

“Michael, look me straight in the eyes and tell me the truth. You have never kissed a girl before, have you?” she pressed on.

“Well honestly, no,” he told her.

“Why not? You’re not scared are you?” she asked.

“Maybe, I just never had a girlfriend before,” he told her.

“Okay, I’m going to make this easy for you,” she told him.

“Why? What are you going to do?” he asked.

“I’m going to let you kiss me, silly,” she proclaimed.

“Are you sure you want me to do this?” he asked.

“Oh yeah, I’m sure,” she told him.

“But what if I’m not . . .” he paused.

“What if you’re not what?” she asked.

“You know . . . any . . . good?” he told her.

“Excuse me. You’re scared, aren’t you? Okay, just close your eyes, and I’ll kiss you. Then you can return the favor. Okay?” she told him.

“Well, okay . . . if you really want me too . . . I guess,” he said as he closed his eyes.

She had to stretch upward to do it, but she slowly pressed her lips against his. As soon as she did, he threw his arms around her and pulled her into him and gave her the most passionate kiss that she had ever had. When he finished, he slowly released his hug and pulled his lips from hers. She just looked at him.

“Wow, I think you been teasin’ me. Where in the world did you ever learn to kiss like that?” she asked.

“Oh, I might have stretched the truth a bit, but—” he told her.

“A little bit? I have never been kissed like that before. Ever,” she proclaimed. “Can you do it again?” she asked.

“Sure, anytime you want me to,” he told her.

“Well then, do it again. Right now,” she told him.

Without hesitation, he planted his lips onto hers. If you could have seen inside her head, you would have seen the best firework show in history. Her arms found their way back around his neck. And she pressed her lips into his as hard as she could. As they pulled away from each other, Katie almost lost her balance and started to stumble. But Mike caught her.

“Wow, no, double wow! You darn near knocked me off of my feet. You kiss like that all of the time?” she asked.

“I reckon so, but I’ve never kissed myself before, so I really don’t know, but I guess that I just might,” he told her.

“Well, I figure we’ll just have to keep on a kissin’ then because while it’s obvious that you don’t need any more practice, I surely do. And I kind of enjoy this type of homework,” she said with a big grin on her face.

“We can do that, you know the homework thing, but right now, I think we best be headin’ to the soda fountain. All of this kissing is making me kind of thirsty,” he told her as he started walking with his first love close to his side.

The soda fountain was rather empty as they came in and took a seat by the window. They ordered two malteds, one chocolate and a strawberry for her. But if the truth was to be told, Katie’s mind was still thinking about those kisses, those absolutely wonderful kisses. Yes, this would require some serious research and further experimentation for sure.

Soon the place started to get busier. But Katie and Mike didn’t notice. They were too busy with some small talk that every normal red-blooded

America boy and girl would have, simple things like their likes and dislikes. They soon realized that everything that one of them liked, the other did too. It was as if their chance encounter at the movie house was in fact an act of divine intervention for sure. Maybe, or so it would seem. God knew that they were supposed to be an item. God knew it, Mike and Katie knew it, and soon, the entire town would know it as well.

Mike looked at Katie and changed the conversation. "Katie, it would be my honor if you'd allow me to take you to the Fourth of July picnic, if you were so inclined," he told her.

"Michael darling, that's what I love about you," she told him.

"What do you like about me? Because I asked my girl to go to a picnic with me?" he asked.

"No, I like it when you're silly," she said.

"Silly? I wasn't being silly," he told her.

"Yes, you were. I've already picked out which dress to wear, silly," she told him.

"Really? When did you do that?" he asked.

"Well, when you said that you loved me, I thought about wearing my yellow dress, but then you gave me the ring, and I thought about wearing my blue dress, but then you kissed me, and I knew right then that it had to be my red one," she told him.

"Really? I like the color red," he responded.

"Good because I really look good in red. Or so I've been told."

"I have no doubt that you would look good in any color," he told her. "Hey, I'm going to put a nickel in the jukebox. I've got a song in my mind that fits you to a T. So if you'll excuse me, I'll be right back. Okay?"

"Okay, as long as it isn't that song about a puppy in the window," she told him.

"No, just wait a second. I figure that you'll like it," he told her as he walked toward the jukebox over in the far corner of the room. While Mike

was over at the jukebox, Katie just stared at the ring on her finger. As Mike walked back to their booth, he started pushing the tables out of the way.

He held out his hand. "Katie Windslow, may I have this dance?" he asked her.

She gave her hand to him. "You want to dance right here, right now?" she asked.

"Katie it's not important where you dance or to which music you dance to. What's important is the person with whom you're dancin' with," Mike told her as he pulled her up to meet him. The jukebox started playing Michael's request on cue.

And the two newly found lovebirds slowly started to sway back and forth to the song "Unforgettable" by a rather new singer named Nat King Cole. They danced their first of many life's dances as everyone in the soda shop just stopped whatever they had been doing and watched them. Some of them watched with jealous hearts while others watched with envy in their eyes.

But it wasn't until the song had finished and they were pulling away from each other that Mike realized that Katie was crying.

"Katie, what's wrong?" he asked out of concern.

"I'm in love, silly. These are tears of overwhelming joy," she told him.

Then the two of them noticed that everyone in the room was cheering and clapping for them, for their dance, and for their love for each other.

Katie and Mike just headed back to their booth kind of embarrassed, kind of proud, but very much in love.

Mike and Katie were starting to giggle at each other as they sat down. They were truly embarrassed, but they really didn't care about what other people thought. In fact, they were so caught up in themselves that they didn't notice Rick as he sat down in the booth across from them.

"Is this a private party, or can anyone join in?" he asked.

Katie and Mike both looked at him at the same time.

“Hey there, Rick,” Mike said to him.

“You two look pretty cozy and all,” Rick said in a sinister tone.

“By whatever do you mean, my dear sir?” Katie said with a huge smile on her face.

“Nothing really, just making small talk, I reckon,” he replied.

“Haven’t you ever seen two people any more in love than we are?” she asked.

Rick turned to look at Mike. “You sly curd dog, you certainly didn’t waste any time, did ya?” he said to Mike with a huge grin on his face.

“I told you last night that I found her. Did you really think that I would lie about such a thing? I mean really, I thought you knew me better than that,” Mike answered.

“Well no, but I didn’t think you would move that fast either,” he said.

“Well, apparently, I move faster than anyone would ever dream of,” Mike pointed out.

“How fast?” Rick asked.

And with that, without any hints from Mike, Katie held out her hand and showed Rick the ring.

“Well, lordy lord, take a look at that. Isn’t that your grandma’s ring?” Rick asked in total disbelief.

“Sure is. Looks pretty good on her, don’t it?” Mike asked.

“Couldn’t look any better on any other hand, I figure,” Rick said.

“Well, forget that notion right here, and now Rick, this is mine, and I plan on wearing it and showing it off every day for the rest of my life. So what have you got to say to that?” Katie asked.

“Congratulations, I guess. I’m really happy for the both of you. Really!” he answered.

“So, Rick, now I have to ask you the very same thing you asked me yesterday. Who are you taking to the Fourth of July picnic?” Mike asked

him.

“Got me, guess I really need to find a date. Hey, maybe we can double-date, you know, just the four of us?” Rick suggested.

“That would depend on who you ask,” Katie said. “I really don’t care for the stuck-up snob Susie, but anyone else would be fine I guess.”

“Susie? No way. We don’t even like each other,” Rick told her.

“Well, I didn’t mean to tell you who you can take. I was just saying that I’d prefer that she wasn’t around me. She was the very first person that I met in this town, but now that I know her, she really isn’t a friend at all,” she said.

“He said that he doesn’t even like her, so that should settle that, I reckon,” Mike proclaimed.

“Yeah, so what else is happening?” Rick asked.

Katie looked around the place and was shocked to see Susie sitting just two tables away. She wondered to herself if she had heard what she had said. But in truth, she really didn’t care.

“Mike can I have some change for the jukebox?” she asked.

“Sure, play a couple of songs if you want ta,” Mike said as he handed her some change. Mike got up to let her out of the booth. She casually strolled over to the jukebox. She didn’t care what songs she picked ’cause she had other reasons for getting up from the booth. After she had finished picking her songs, she went back to her table, but not before she made a fast stop at Susie’s booth.

“Hey, Susie, remember what I told you? Well, look at this,” she said as she shoved her ring hand up toward Susie’s face. “And if you think this big ole ring is cool, you should try kissing him. It will knock you off of your feet.” She then turned and walked away from Susie’s table without ever giving Susie a chance to respond.

Mike got up and let her sit back down. As he sat himself back down, he looked at Katie. “What was all of that about?” he asked her.

“Nothing, just girl talk,” she proclaimed.

Susie didn't say anything to anyone as she ran from the soda shop.

"Was she crying?" Rick asked Mike.

"What did you say to her, Katie?" Mike asked.

"Nothing. Maybe what she wanted to order ain't on the menu anymore," she proclaimed.

Mike and Rick both knew what had been said but didn't take it any further. Mike changed the subject. "Hey, why don't you take that girl at the drug store, you know the cute one? What's her name?" Mike said to Rick in an effort to get the conversation going another direction.

"You mean Kathy. Hey, that ain't a bad idea. She is cute. Maybe not as cute as Katie here but still pretty darn cute all the same," Rick replied.

"Why, thank you, Rick. I'll take my compliments wherever I can get them," Katie said with a smile. Katie turned her attention back to Mike. "So you think this Kathy girl is cute, do ya?" she said as she playfully slapped his shoulder.

"Oh yeah, cute as a dickens, but I'm not into dickens. I'm into you," he told her.

"I don't know what a dickens is, but that was a pretty nice save there," Rick said with a smile on his face.

"Oh yeah, that was good," Katie answered.

"Well, thank you to the both of you. I too will take my compliments wherever I can get them," Mike proclaimed.

"Well, I need to be going. I promised my parents that I would give them a hand around the house this afternoon. But these malteds are on me, my little gift to the newest couple in all of Savannah," Rick said as he picked up the check.

"Why, thank you, Rick. You are truly a gentleman for sure," Katie told him.

"Well, I'll be seein' ya around. Hey, did you tell her about the hole in the floor? You know, how you made it and all?" Rick asked.

“Uuuhhh, no I didn’t, but I guess you just did. Thanks, Rick,” Mike told him.

“Didn’t figure you did, so I thought that I would help you out a bit. Later,” Rick said as he turned and went to pay the check.

“You made that hole in my bedroom floor?” she asked.

“Yeah, but it wasn’t your room then, and besides, I was about eight or so when I did that. We were playing around and running, and all of a sudden, *crash!* I went clear through the floor. It’s funny now, but it hurt like hell back then,” Mike explained.

“Wait until I tell my daddy that you was playing around in my bedroom. Remember I told you that he has a shotgun and all?” Katie said jokingly.

“Now, Katie, that wouldn’t be very funny now, would it?” Mike asked her.

“About as funny as a porcupine with an itch,” she said laughing.

“Very funny,” Mike said as he stood up to leave. “Come on, I have something that I want to show you,” he said as he helped her from the booth.

“What is it?” she asked.

“You’ll see. It’s a secret,” he told her.

Katie and Mike walked hand in hand down the sidewalk until they came to the edge of town. There, off to the left, was a small dirt path that led off into the trees.

“Where are you takin’ me?” Katie asked again.

“Just trust me. You’ll love it, I promise,” Mike reassured her.

The path took them around the back side of town and up to a small hill to a meadow overlooking the town. While the meadow was up above the town, it was only maybe two hundred yards from Katie’s home. There was an unobstructed view of the front of the house. From here, it might be an easy twenty-minute walk to her front door while taking the beaten path, or

the road could take you maybe thirty or forty-five minutes to finish the walk.

“There, check out the view. You can see everything up here. But be careful where you step. This whole area is littered with gopher holes,” Mike told her.

“Wow, I didn’t think we climbed this high. Look, you can even see my house over there and the church. Wow, this is cool. But this is weird. You have trees all around this place, but yet there’s nothing growing here except for some grass. Why is that, do you suppose?” Katie asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe it has something to do with all of these gopher holes. Here, sit down here. I just want to enjoy the view,” he told her. Katie sat down, and Michael sat down next to her.

Katie was scoping out the town when she noticed that Mike was staring at her. “What? You’re supposed to be enjoying the view, remember?” she asked.

“Oh, but I am. I enjoy looking at you,” he told her.

“Michael, the town, remember?” she asked.

“I’ve seen the town, but I ain’t never seen anything as beautiful as you, Ms. Katie,” Mike responded.

“Really? Then I guess you ain’t seen much ’cause I ain’t that pretty.”

“Ain’t that pretty? Why, Katie my dear, you’re underestimating yourself a bit. I’m telling ya, you’re as beautiful as only God could make it,” he told her.

“Really? Then prove it,” she told him.

“How do I prove it?” he asked.

“Well, you can start off by kissing me again,” she told him.

“I didn’t bring you up here for that type of stuff, Katie. I’m really not that type of guy,” he told her.

“Well, good because I’m not that type of girl either. But the last time you kissed me, you darn near knocked me off of my feet. So I think that I’ll

be better now that I don't have to worry about falling down," she proclaimed.

So he leaned over and kissed her. But as he went to pull away, she threw her arms around his neck and pulled him back into her for a much better kiss. She fell onto her back with him falling on top of her. Then it happened. Katie could feel her entire body starting to tingle all the way down into her oxfords. As she released her hug, he slowly pulled away from her. He stopped a few inches from her face.

"Like that?" he asked.

"Well, almost, but I was thinking something more like this," she said as she pulled him back down for an even more powerful kiss than last time. But this time, he gave in and fell onto her. He could feel her body pressing into his.

Neither one of them had ever been this close to another person of the opposite sex before. And without saying it, it was clear to both of them that they had better stop before things got out of hand. Mike sat up while Katie just lay there staring at the clouds. Katie sat up and looked at her feet.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle. Just lookie there at what you've gone and done to me," Katie said with devilish twist to her voice.

"What did I do? I just kissed you, that's all!" he proclaimed.

"Relax, Michael, you just knocked off one of my shoes."

Mike looked down and saw that one of her shoes had fallen off.

"Well I'll be," he said.

"Well I'm glad we quit when we did. A few more kisses like that, and I'd be naked," she said half laughing.

"Really? So how many more kisses do ya think it would take?" he asked her jokingly.

"Very funny, but it surely wouldn't take that many, I'm sure," she told him with a huge smile on her face as she lay back onto her back with her arms crossed under her head.

“Michael, do you think we’re moving too fast?” she asked him. “I mean, we only met each other yesterday, and like I already have your ring, and you’ve got one of my shoes off and all.”

“Well, maybe a bit too fast, but I have no regrets. Not at all,” he told her. “And we can always put your shoe back on if that makes you feel better.”

“It’s not the shoe. Well, it is. It’s like this. I’m lying here in a field with this guy that I’ve just met yesterday, and I can feel that my shoe is off, but I like the way that it feels because it was you that made me feel this way. You understand what I’m trying to say?” she asked him.

“I think so. It’s like the sensation that came over me the very moment that I first saw you. I just knew in my heart that we were supposed to be. Ya know?” he asked her back.

“Well, I’ll tell you the truth. I have never felt this way for anybody ever before. I really mean that. It’s a nice feeling deep down inside. So does that mean that we really love each other that much? Is it really possible to fall that much in love with someone that quickly?” she asked him.

“Well, I look at it this way. From the very moment that I saw you last night, I haven’t been able to think of anything else. So if the Lord wants us to be together, then who are we to question him? The Lord works in mysterious ways, my dear,” he answered back.

“Yeah, and he works really fast too!” Katie said with a laugh.

“I guess he does at that,” Mike responded. “But there are a few other things that I need to ask you,” he said.

“Like what?” she asked.

“I would like to ask you to go with us to the train depot on Tuesday. There’s someone that I think you need to meet,” he told her.

“Someone for me to meet? And who would that be if I might ask?” she replied.

“My sister, Melissa,” he told her.

“Your sister? You never told me that you had a sister,” she replied.

“Yeah well, with everything that has happened in the past day or two, it must have slipped my mind. She’s away at college, but she’ll be home on Tuesday for a visit,” he told her. “But there’s going to be a conflict. I can see it coming just as clear as I see you now,” he added.

“A conflict? Why would there be any type of conflict between me and your sister?” she asked.

“Well, it’s fairly obvious that you don’t like Susie, and that’s your choice, but Susie is my sister’s best friend. So you can picture this trouble brewing, and Susie will surely add as much fuel to the fire as possible,” he told her.

“I see. Hmmm, that does create a bit of a problem, doesn’t it? So what would you like me to do?” she asked.

“Well, if you could possibly see it clear to steer clear of Susie, then I’ll have a chance to explain to Melissa all of the assorted details and just maybe we can throw some water on the fire long before it ever starts. Can you do that?” he asked.

“Well, I’ll do my best to avoid her, but if she comes looking for a catfight, then there’s not much I can do to stop her,” she responded.

“Well, I’ll talk to Susie and tell her to lay off. That’s all we can do. We’ll have to play the rest off of the cuff, so to speak,” he told her.

“Okay, but you’ll have to talk to her while I’m there. Maybe not right there, but close enough to keep my eye on her. I don’t trust her, not at all,” she proclaimed.

“Fair enough. But you do know that you can trust me alone with any female. Don’t you?” he asked her.

“I do. I really do, but it’s her that I can’t trust. She’s a very jealous and sneaky little thing, kind of like a snake in the grass. You might know it’s there, but it isn’t until it jumps up and bites you in the ass that you truly realize just how dangerous it can be,” she added.

“A snake, you say? Never thought about it that way before. But you’re probably right,” he told her.

“Yeah, a rattlesnake with very sharp teeth indeed,” she added.

“Well, with a rattlesnake, you at least have a warning by the rattling of its rattle. But I’m not too sure that Susie would offer you that courtesy,” Mike told her.

“Okay, but just to clear up some of the loose details, why is Susie so hooked on you? Were you and her a couple at one time or what?” she asked him.

“Well, to tell you the truth, Melissa told her that I liked her. But that was back about the time that I fell through your floor. But we were just friends really. I reckon she just likes the idea of us being a couple, and she refuses to let go of that idea,” he explained.

“So you two were never an item, say like a boyfriend and girlfriend type of thing?” she asked.

“No way. Never happened. We were just buddies or friends. I swear,” he told her.

“Relax, my dear Michael, I believe you. Remember, I’m the new girl around here. So I’d like to know what I’m getting myself into is all,” she explained to him.

“Okay, and I do understand why you would have so many concerns. But you really don’t need to be upset or worried about anything ever happening between Susie and myself,” he told her again.

“Well, that’s good enough even for this girl. So shall we head back over to my house, or do you wish to continue taking in the view?” she asked him. “Of the town this time, Michael.”

“Yeah, we can go if ya want ta. I can look at you as we walk if I want ta,” he told her as he helped her to her feet.

“Hang on there, I’ve got to put my shoe back on unless you’d like to try knocking off the other one too?” she said laughing.

“Naw, I’ll save that for the picnic,” he told her.

“Oh, you think so, do ya? Well, when you see me in my red dress, you hadn’t better be lookin’ at my shoes,” she proclaimed.

“We’ll see what we shall see,” he said with a huge grin on his face.

# A Leap of Faith

The walk back to Matterson House was slow at best. Mike and Katie weren't in any hurry at all. They preferred to enjoy their time alone, just the two of them—hand in hand, heart in heart.

As they walked through the gate at the end of the walk, they heard Grady's voice, but they couldn't see him.

"Daddy, where are you?" Katie yelled to her father.

"Hey, I'm up here just patchin' the roof. Hang on. I'll be comin' down in a minute, I reckon, unless I fall, then it will be a lot faster than I might had been planning," Grady yelled down to Mike and Katie.

"Daddy, get yourself down from there. You be careful now. Ya hear me, Daddy?" she yelled back.

"Yeah, yeah. Darn girl thinks just because I'm older, I shouldn't be doing what needs be done," he said in a voice only loud enough for himself to hear.

"How did he get up there? That's nearly three stories high. Your daddy is one crazy guy," Mike told Katie.

"Yeah, or just really stupid. I guess it all depends on how you look at it," she answered in a worried tone.

"Well, I wouldn't call him stupid, maybe a little overly brave but never stupid," he replied.

"Yeah, but you don't know him like I do. Sometimes he's really stupid! I swear to God he is," she told him.

Grady was standing up on the top of the house, looking down at them. "This will get them, I reckon," he said as he moved out of their line of sight and yelled as if he fell off the roof and then sat there quietly.

“Oh my god, he fell!” she yelled as she and Mike ran around to the back of the house, half expecting to see him splattered all over the ground. “Daddy!” she yelled as she circled around the corner of the house. But she found nothing! “Daddy?” she said as she looked around.

“Where is he?” Mike asked.

“I don’t know. I heard him fall, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Well, I thought that I did, but—” Mike was saying until he was interrupted by Grady’s voice from above them. Mike and Katie both looked up to see a very much alive Grady looking down at them.

“Scared ya, didn’t I?” he said with a smile.

“Daddy! That wasn’t funny, not at all. I thought you were dead!” she yelled up to him. “You get down from there this second! You hear me?” she told him. Katie looked over at Michael who was trying not to laugh. “And what do you find so funny may I ask?” she asked.

“He’s right. He got us,” Mike told her as he looked up at Grady.

“Pretty funny! ‘Should have saw the two of you running, best darn entertainment I’ve enjoyed in years!” Grady yelled back.

“I swear to God, you two are impossible,” Katie proclaimed.

“Hey, Grady, how in the heck did you get up there?” Mike asked. “I don’t see a ladder.”

“Who needs a ladder when you have a giant oak tree only a few feet away?” he answered.

“Excuse me?” Katie asked.

“Grady, that tree is almost three feet away. How did get from the tree to the roof?” Mike asked.

“Closer to four, I figure. But to answer your question, I jumped. ‘Couldn’t move the tree or the house, so I figured I’d just jump and hope for the best, I reckon,” he told him.

“Oh no, you didn’t!” Katie yelled up to her dad.

“Oh, sissy, relax. Just how do you think I’m getting down from here? Same way I got up here, I reckon,” he told her.

“Grady, I hope to God you’re just kidding us. Really, where’s your ladder?” Mike asked.

“Sorry, sonny, no ladder, but you might want to get Katie away from here just in case I miss. I’d hate like hell to land on her,” he said half laughing.

“Daddy, that’s not funny. Now don’t you dare. I swear, Daddy!” Katie yelled to her dad.

“Katie, I love ya dearly, but you’re just like your mother, God bless her soul. She didn’t have faith in me either. So if you’ll stand back, one way or another, I’m coming down. I figure if God wants me to make it, then I will, but if he doesn’t, well, I guess it’s a leap of faith. So here I go,” Grady proclaimed.

“Daddy, no!” she yelled.

Then he was gone. They backed up to see more of the roof. But he was nowhere to be found.

“All right now, where did he go?” Katie asked.

“Got me. One second he’s there, then the very next thing, he’s gone,” Mike told her.

Katie and Mike just stood there, both staring at the roof half expecting to see Grady jumping off of the roof and trying to grab a branch on the giant oak tree . . . or worse.

Mike and Katie just stood there in silence, waiting.

“What ya looking at?” Grady asked them. Mike and Katie spun around to see Grady standing behind them.

“Daddy?” Katie said as she hugged his neck.

“I thought you were going to jump over to that tree. So how did you get down?” Mike asked.

“You both must think I’m really stupid expecting me to jump for some damn old tree. Well, I ain’t. ‘Came in through the attic window. You really thought that I was going to jump off a third-story roof and try to grab on to a stupid tree, did ya? I might be old, but I ain’t that old,” he told them.

“You scared me, Daddy. I thought you were serious,” Katie told him.

“Relax, Katie dear. If I wanted to commit suicide, it surely won’t be off of a damn old roof nor in front of you, my dear,” he told her.

“Well, I would hope not, you crazy old man,” she told him as she hugged his neck.

“Katie, you being only twenty years old and all, you need to relax some. I plan on being around to see my grandkids sitting on my lap someday,” he told her.

“Well, good, then you’ll be around for a very long time, ain’t that right?” she said as she looked over at Mike.

“Uuhhh, right, a long time,” Mike answered with a very questionable tone.

Grady and Katie just looked over at Michael.

“What? I said a long time, didn’t I?” Mike asked.

“Yeah, but you didn’t sound too convincin’, is all” Grady answered back.

“I’m sorry, but you just caught me off guard a bit. Never thought about having any kids, is all,” he answered.

“Well, true. But I think having kids would be something I might want to do someday,” Katie told him.

“Well, me too, I think. Never thought about it before, is all” he told her.

“Relax, I was talking about later, you know, when I’m twenty-two or so,” Katie answered.

“Okay, but we’ll talk more about it then, okay?” he asked.

“Well, Michael, I do declare that you’re a bit bashful, ain’t ya?” she told him.

“Bashful? About what?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing. We’ll talk about it later in private,” Katie said as she winked her right eye, so Michael would be sure to see it.

“Anyone thirsty? How about some tea, anyone?” Grady asked as he tried to change the topic of conversation.

“Yeah, that sounds good. Count me in,” Mike said as he kind of stared at Katie with a questionable look in his eyes.

“Good. Katie, would you be so kind as to fetch us some tea?” Grady asked her. “We’ll meet you on the front porch.”

“Sure, Daddy,” she said as she headed toward the house.

“Come on, son. Let’s talk a bit, shall we?” Grady asked Mike as they started walking toward the front of the house.

“Sure. So what do ya want to talk about?” he asked.

“Katie,” he told him.

“What about her?” Mike asked.

“You’re not going to hurt her, are ya?” Grady asked him.

“Why, no, sir. I would never,” Mike proclaimed.

“I didn’t think so, but you have to understand one thing. Katie is all that I have left since her mother passed away, God bless her soul, so I’m really protective, you see? I just don’t want to see her getting hurt, is all,” Grady told him.

“Well, I can promise you this—I’ll never do anything to hurt her,” Mike told him.

“Never promise anything. Promises are easily broken. Just give me your word, okay? A man’s word is as strong as the person giving it, I reckon,” Grady said.

“Okay then, you have my word on it,” Mike replied.

“That’s good enough for me. And that thing about having kids, don’t fret it. That’s her mother talking,” he told him.

“Well, that’s good. Not that I wouldn’t want to have some someday, but like I said, ‘never thought about it, is all,’ he told him.

“Good. So tell me, Did ya really think I was going to jump to that tree or what?” Grady asked him.

“Yeah, I did. I really did,” Mike told him with a smile.

# Hurt and Brokenhearted

Susie's dad came in from another boring day at the Bank of Savannah where he had worked for the past twenty-two years. Normally, he would never work on a Sunday, but this was a very special deal that needed some final touches to close. So for a few hours, he had agreed to work. So like every other day, he walked up behind his wife and gave her a hug and a kiss on the neck. And like every other day, he asked her the same question, "Why don't we sell everything and just move to Alaska?"

And like always, his wife would reply with the same old answer, "Because you don't like the snow, and we don't have anything worth selling."

And today was no different except for what his wife said afterward. "Honey, I think you really need to go see your daughter. She came in about an hour or so ago, slamming the screen door and crying. She's been up there in her room ever since," she told him.

"So what's the problem this time?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've tried to talk to her, but she keeps telling me that her life is ruined. So you know what that means, don't ya?" she asked.

"Yep, same thing as every other time—boys! Okay, I'll go see if I can't pull another magical solution out of my hat and see if that does the trick. After all, I'm Daddy, and it's all part of the job title," he said as he headed up the stairs. Standing in front of her bedroom door, he took a deep breath before he knocked. "Susie dear, it's Daddy, Can I come in?" he asked.

"Go away. My whole life is ruined," she answered.

"Now, Susie dear, I'm coming in, okay? We can talk you through this. We always do, right? So I'm coming in, okay?" he told her as he slowly opened the door to her room. Susie was still wearing the dress that she had been wearing at the soda fountain just a few hours earlier. He sat down on the bed next to her. She had her face buried into the pillow.

“So you want to tell me what’s going on, pumpkin? You’re still my pumpkin, ain’t ya?” he asked her.

“Everything is ruined, Daddy, all because of some new girl. She took what was supposed to be mine, Daddy,” she told him.

“I take it that we’re talking about Mike again. Am I right?” he asked.

“Yeah, we were supposed to be married and have a family, but now he’s given her his grandmother’s ring. I hate her, Daddy. I just hate her,” she proclaimed.

“Now, Susie dear, *hate* is a very harsh word. You know that I don’t like that word, never have, never will,” he told her.

“Well, I’m sorry, but I really hate her. I really do. I wish she had never moved here in the first place,” she continued.

“Excuse me, who is she? Does she have a name? I find it easier to talk about someone if you know their name,” he replied.

“Katie! Ms. Goody Two-Shoes. Miss Katie Windslow, the little witch,” she told him.

“Windslow? I don’t recall anybody living here by that name. And trust me, I know everyone in this town. But go ahead. Tell me what happened,” he told her.

“We went to the movie house, just her and me. And then Mike showed up, and the rest is history. And now she’s wearing his ring. My life is ruined,” she told him as she started crying again.

“Well, here’s the same question that I’ve asked you time and time again. Your plans on being with Mike, is that your dream, or is it real? You think about it. Did you two ever talk about getting married, or is this something that’s just in your head?” he asked her.

“Well, we never talked about it, but I want it, Daddy,” she told him.

“Honey, this has been going on for years, hasn’t it? Your hidden crush on Michael. I remember way back when you were eight or nine, and we had this talk for the very first time. You remember that?” he asked.

“Yeah, but nothing has changed, Daddy,” she told him.

“Well, apparently it has. Maybe not to you, but for him it has. You know that love is a very funny thing. You can love anyone you want to, but you can’t make anyone love you back. It’s just the luck of the draw, sweetheart. Sometimes you win, and sometimes you lose,” he explained to her.

“But it isn’t fair, Daddy. I’ve loved him first, then this little tramp shows up and ruins everything,” she explained to him.

“Look, dear, nobody ever told you life was fair. And love is worse. It’s a great feeling to be in love. Just look at me and your mama. We love each other, don’t we? But did you know that I almost married someone else? Yep, Rita Tubbleweyer. But I didn’t, and now, I’m married to your mama. Love is strange,” he told her.

“Rita Tubbleweyer? That’s a weird name. That would have made me Susie Tubblemeyer!” she proclaimed.

“Well, it didn’t happen, but you’re missing the bigger picture here. There’s more fish in the sea, dear. Why settle for a minnow when you can have a big-mouth bass? You’re so young, and you have your whole life in front of you. I think it’s time that you move on,” he told her.

“But, Daddy, I really love him. I really do. It’s just not fair,” she told him again.

“Well, here’s the question that you have to ask yourself. And you alone must decide on which answer you take. If you truly like this guy, would you rather have him as a close and dear friend or not have him at all? And as far as this Katie girl goes, you can make her jealous and get her mad, or you can be her friend,” he told her.

“Make her jealous? How do I do that?” she asked.

“Well, maybe *jealous* ain’t the right word. But let’s say that you were to go out and get yourself a different boyfriend. And then you can stand there with your head held high and make her jealous of you in that way. Most girls hate it when another girl is happier than they are,” he explained.

“Really? Hhmmm, that just might work. So if I were to go out and get another boyfriend, I could make Michael jealous. Thanks, Daddy, you’re the greatest,” she said as she hugged his neck.

“Now, Susie, that’s not what I said, not at all,” he told her.

“I know, Daddy, but I like my idea better. Thanks, Daddy,” she said as she got up and ran from her room.

He just sat there speechless as he heard her run down the stairs and out of the front screen door. He slowly walked down the stairs where he met his wife.

“So I see that you fixed everything once more,” she told him.

“I’m not sure what just happened, but I do believe that I might have made things even worse,” he said as he stood there with an empty look on his face. “I think that there might be a storm brewing, a very nasty storm indeed.”

He slowly explained what was said, and when he finished, they just stared at each other.

“Oh my! This really doesn’t look too promising at all, does it?” she slowly told him.

“No, dear, it certainly doesn’t,” he answered.

# A Promise Is a Promise

Katie filled her daddy in on all of the details of the day, especially the part about Michael's sister, Melissa, and her homecoming on Tuesday. But she left out the part about the kissin' and losing her shoe. After all, daddies don't need to know everything.

"A sister you say? So how long has she been away?" Grady asked.

"I think just around a year or so," Mike answered.

"A year? Hmmm, sounds like it might be a good reason for an old-fashioned barbeque if you ask me. Hell, we can throw your sister one hell of a homecoming party," Grady told him.

"That's a great idea, Daddy. We could invite everyone, and you can dust off our old banjos, an' we could have a real southern hold down," Katie added.

"Well, that all sounds great, but I'll have to check it out with my parents first just in case they're planning something. Katie, you play a banjo?" he asked.

"A little," she answered.

"A little? Don't you believe her, son? My little girl can hold her own against some of the best. Not too bad on the piano and guitar too," Grady added.

"Really? Well, I'm pretty good on the banjo and the guitar as well," Mike added.

"Great, so you two can battle it out against each other. Nothin' personal, son, but my money is on Katie," Grady added.

"Well, it wouldn't be a battle, more like a union of our talents," Mike answered.

"Michael, now you're not backing out of a challenge, are ya?" Grady asked.

“Well, no, but if Katie wants to go head-to-head, then I am game too,” he replied.

“Michael, I accept your challenge,” Katie answered.

“Wait a second, I didn’t challenge you. You challenged me,” Mike replied.

“Daddy, doesn’t it sound like he’s backing out?” Katie asked. Sure does to me.”

“Does to me too, I reckon. I’ve heard people backing out before, and that’s what it sounded like back then and still sounds the same today,” Grady responded.

“Okay, okay, you win. If you want a challenge, then a challenge is what you’ve got. Just don’t go getting your feelings all bent out of place when I put you to shame,” Mike told her.

“Likewise. Oh, this is going to be good. I just hope you’re as good as you think you are,” Katie told him.

“Think? Oh, darling, are you in store for a lesson or two. I’m good, but we’ll see what we shall see, won’t we?” he told her with a hint of confidence in his voice.

“All right, you two. Knock it off. This is about Mike’s sister coming home, not a war between the two of you. So talk to your parents, Michael. We don’t have that much time to set all of this up and send out the invitations. But we’ll hold it here, over there in that large grassy area. I’ve got one hell of a recipe for some really good southern fried chicken and a barbeque sauce that will curl your toes and make your eyes water,” Grady proclaimed with a sense of pride to his voice.

“Oh, Daddy, you and your famous sauce. That stuff is some downright good fixin’s,” Katie added.

“All right then. I’ll go check with my parents, but they would have told me by now if they had any other plans,” Mike explained.

“Well, you’re welcome to use that thing—what’s it called? Oh, yeah, the telephone if you can figure it out. I never liked all of this new stuff

springin' up all over the place. I reckon I'll get by just as I've always have without it," Grady told him.

"Oh, Daddy, you're behind the times. It's 1955, Daddy. Things are changing," Katie told him.

"Well, you younger kids might like all of the new age stuff. As for me, I've gotten along all this time without it, so I reckon I'll do just as well without all of it. Can't miss what you've never had. That's the way that I figure it," Grady told them.

"Okay, Grady, I'll use your phone if Katie can show me where it is," Mike told.

"Come on, Mike, I'll show it to ya. Follow me," she said as she entered the house. Mike soon followed her inside. Grady just sat on the porch drinking his tea.

Whatever Mike was expecting to see when he entered the house, it wasn't anywhere near what he saw. What used to be a grimy, beaten-up house was now gleaming with polished woodwork, mahogany banisters, and crystal chandeliers.

"Wow, would you look at this place! This is fantastic. You guys did all of this all by yourselves?" Mike asked.

"I told ya my daddy was really good at fixin' things," she told him.

"Yeah, but this is unbelievable. You can even smell the fresh wood. This is great," Mike told her.

"Here's the phone, Mike. I'll wait for you outside with Daddy," she said as she went outside.

Katie went outside and sat down next to Grady.

"So have you told him about our little secret?" Grady asked her.

"Oh, no, Daddy. I haven't told him anything, but I want to. But that would mean that I would have to tell him everything, and that I'm not prepared to do, at least not yet," she told her dad.

“Well, here’s a little something. A secret is only a secret until you tell someone, but if the truth was to come out from anyone other than you, the damages could prove to be dangerous to the relationship that you two have,” he explained to her.

“So are you telling me that I should tell him the truth?” she asked.

“No, but I reckon since his family is a part of this, I think it might be to your benefit to let him in on it,” he explained.

“But what if we don’t find what we’re looking for, then what?” she asked.

“Well, I have to believe that it is here. The documents tell us it’s here. But there’s over twenty acres of land to search through, not to mention this giant house. Hell, darling, it could be anywhere,” he told her.

“But anywhere doesn’t help us find what we’re looking for. If we do find it, and it’s what you say it is, then we’re heroes. But what if it isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be, Daddy, then what?” she asked.

“You’re asking questions that I just can’t answer. I really wish that I had all of the answers, but I don’t,” he explained to her.

“But what happens to us, Mike and me, if he finds out who I really am? And it’s all for nothing. The last thing that I want to do is to hurt him, Daddy. He’s so special,” Katie explained.

“I know, he seems like such a nice boy too. I reckon we’ll just have to deal with it as it happens then,” he told her as Mike came out of the house.

“Grady, I have to say that I am very impressed with what you’ve done to this house. The interior is simply breathtaking. How did you do all of it?” he asked.

“Well, son, I’ve always been gifted with my hands, add to that what free time I have, and it all starts falling into place. You like it, do ya?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah! I used to play in this house when I was a kid, but I never knew it used to look like this. Who knew?” Mike asked.

“Like I told you before, this house used to be special, and someday it will be again. There’s a lot of history in this old house. Some of it hasn’t even been written yet. So what did your parents say?” he asked.

“Oh yeah, I’m sorry. They said that it was a great idea, and they’ve offered any help that we might need, especially food. My ma loves to cook,” he added.

“Great! Tomorrow I’ll set everything up. What time on Tuesday?” Grady asked.

“What time? Oh, you mean what time my sister’s train comes in? I think it’s ten or ten-thirty Tuesday morning,” Mike told him.

“Fine. You and Katie do the invites, and I’ll handle the rest. You wouldn’t know where I could get my hands on a bunch of tables and chairs, would ya?” Grady asked.

“Yeah, I do I think the church has some that we can use. I’ll talk to Father Mathews, and I’ll let you know, okay?” Mike told him.

“Okay, I reckon that will work out just fine then,” Grady told him.

“But right now, I really think I should be going. It’s getting late, and I wouldn’t want to miss dinner,” Mike added.

“Mike, I’ll walk you to the gate. Is that okay, Daddy?’ she asked.

“I reckon that would be fine. I’ll be seeing you, son,” Grady told Mike.

“Yes, sir, I truly think you will. Good day to you, sir,” he added as he started walking toward the gate with Katie at his side.

“Michael, I want you to know that I had a wonderful day today, the best day that I can recall having in a long time. I just wanted to say thank you for everything,” she told him as they walked toward the gate.

“No, thank you. You make it all possible,” he replied.

“But before you leave, do you think you can do me one little favor? Please?” she asked.

“Sure. For you, anything,” he answered back.

“Let’s see if you can knock off the other shoe!” she asked with a smile.

“Well, gee, I don’t know. Your daddy might be watching us still,” he replied.

“Michael, I ain’t a little girl anymore. I’m almost twenty-one, so go ahead and kiss me,” she demanded.

“Katie, one look at you, and I know that you’re not a little girl anymore. In fact, what I see is a beautiful young lady that is both stunning and captivating while still retaining that certain element of a true southern belle. You’re anything but a little girl,” he told her.

“Well, thank you, my good sir, but I’m not out to win a beauty contest. All I want is a gosh darn kiss, so kiss me already,” she pleaded.

“Well, the problem with that is you see, I’m a guy and you’re truly a lady, and when I hold you tight, especially in a passionate kiss, something tells me to treat you as you are, a lady. But there’s another part of me that tells me to grab you and sweep you off of your feet and make you mine, if you know what I mean,” he tried to explain to her.

“Really? So your animal instincts are raging from within, are they? Very interesting, but all I’m asking for right here and now is a kiss. So kiss me already. And I can understand your hidden desires too, Michael. I mean, after all, I’m a woman that has those same hidden desires raging inside of her. And while I can truly appreciate you fighting those manly urges as you try to remain a gentleman, sometimes it’s not worth the fight. So kiss me and follow your heart,” she told him.

Michael didn’t say anything else as he pulled her into him. As their lips met, her firm body pressed tightly against his. And without thinking twice, both of his hands slipped down to her nice, firm buttocks and lifted her up to meet him. She gave out a slight moan, but it appeared that she was rather enjoying it as well as one of her feet came up off of the ground as she pulled him tighter into her as well. It was truly the kiss of all kisses.

As he slowly released her and their lips parted, she opened her eyes. “Now that, my dear Michael, is exactly what I wanted. Oh my god, you’re a

great kisser,” she said as she looked down and laughed. “Look I’m still fully dressed. You’ll need to work on that.”

“I already have, at least in my mind,” he informed her.

“Oh, you have, have you? And? Did you like what you saw? I mean, in your mind of course,” she asked him.

“As stunning and as breathtaking as you truly are. Words will never capture the visions of you in my mind,” he told her.

“That is so sweet. Thank you for being a true gentleman, sir. This lady does appreciate how you treat her—like a lady should be treated. I love the way you love me,” she told him.

“You’re welcome, but I have to warn you. I might not be able to control myself forever. After all, you are a woman and I am a man, and while the temptations are growing greater by the moment, I can’t promise you anything other than the fact that I do really love you, and I’ll never hurt you,” he told her.

She pulled away from him slightly and stared into his eyes. “Michael my dear, are you telling me that someday, without warning you might just throw me to the ground and make me yours? Is that what you’re saying?” she asked.

“Well, you wanted the truth, right? So the true thing to say right now would have to be yes, one of these days, I might just throw you to the ground and make love to you,” he told her.

“Wow, I truly believe you when you say it that way. So let me get this right. You’ll throw me to the ground, and I suppose that you’ll remove all of my clothes and then make mad, passionate love to me, did I get this right? That is what you’re saying, right?” she asked him.

“Yes, my dear Katie, that’s exactly what I said,” he answered,

“Good. So some day in the future, I’ll be expecting it then. And fair warning to you, my dear sir, don’t disappoint me by making me wait until I’m an old lady,” she told him as she hugged him again.

“Well, I can surely promise you that I won’t be doing that, but I’d best be going, or someday might be sooner than either of us expected. I’ll see you after work tomorrow,” he told her as he gave her a fast peck on her wanting lips and turned and headed out of the gate. She just stood there watching as the man of her dreams slowly walked away.

Then she yelled to him. “I love you! And that wouldn’t be a bad thing, would it?”

But he didn’t answer her. “God, that man just sets my soul on fire. Thank you, dear Lord!” she said out loud to herself before she turned and headed back to the house.

He thought about her all the way home. Nothing would ever keep him and her apart. Or so he thought.

But as he was thinking about their future together, Susie was setting her plan into action that she hoped would break Mike and Katie up. Jealousy has a way of turning even the nicest people against each other, and Susie wasn’t even nice to start with.

# Susie's Dirty Little Scheme

Susie at one time might have been a really nice girl to be friends with. But not now, especially since Katie wore that goddamn ring. And as long as it remained on her finger, the rules no longer applied. Not that she ever followed them anyway, but certainly not now.

Susie walked up to the front door of Rick's house and rang the bell. To her surprise, Rick answered the door. "Hey Susie what's up?" he asked her.

"Nothing, I just thought that I would stop by to see what you're up to. Can you come outside so we can talk?" she asked.

"I reckon so, but dinner will be ready soon, so it can't be for long," he told her.

So Susie and Rick sat down next to each other on the porch steps.

"So what's on your mind, Susie?" he asked.

"But, Rick, whatever do ya mean? Can't a friend just stop by and visit a friend without having an ulterior motive?" she answered.

"Well, yeah, sure they can, but I've lived here in this house for going on twenty-two years, and all of a sudden you want to stop by. So again I'll ask ya, what's up?" he asked again.

"Really, I guess I never had a reason before, is all," she told him.

"So what's your reason now? Just what is it that you want from me?" he asked.

"Well, okay, you've got me. I actually came here to ask for your help," she finally confessed.

"My help? With what, may I ask?" he asked her.

"You know that shack out behind the Old Miller Pond. Well, I found a box, and it's really heavy. I don't know what's in it, but I can't lift it. So I need your help. So will you help me?" she asked.

“What kind of box?” he asked

“It’s like a chest or a steamer trunk. So will you help me?” she pleaded.

“You just want me to help you lift it, right?” he pressed her for more information.

“Yeah, but if it’s valuable, we can split it right down the middle, you know fifty-fifty,” she said as she tried to lure him into her trap.

“Naw, you can keep whatever is in it all for yourself. I’ll just help you lift it, okay? But I can’t do it until tomorrow after work, okay?” he told her.

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down. So what time do you get off work?” she asked.

“Around four or five usually,” he told her.

“Great! So why don’t we meet there at about five or so, okay?” she suggested.

“Sure, I can do that, so I’ll meet you there around five, and all I’m going to do is help you lift this thing, right?” he asked her again.

“Yeah, just help me lift it. That’s all,” she told him.

“Okay then, I’ll see you tomorrow, but I have to go. I think dinner is ready, so I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said.

“Oh, Rick, you’re the greatest friend ever. Thanks!” she said as she kissed him on the cheek, and she turned to walk away. But she suddenly turned and spun around to face him. “Hey, since we don’t know what’s in this thing, I think it might be a good idea to keep this just between us, okay? I wouldn’t want anyone cutting in on us, okay?” she asked.

“Yeah sure, whatever. It will be our little secret,” he told her.

As she walked away from the porch, Susie had a very evil grin on her face. In a voice only loud enough for her to hear she spoke just one word, “Sucker.”

The following day at work, Rick didn't say anything to Mike about Susie's weird request. After all, he had promised not to tell anyone. And besides, Mike was far too busy yapping about Katie this or Katie that. Especially at lunchtime, the subject of conversation was all about Katie and the wild party that they were throwing for Melissa. So Rick kept to his promise and didn't say a word.

But after work, Rick did tell Mike that he had an errand to run, and he would catch up with him and Katie later at the soda fountain.

"Great, we'll see you there," Mike told him.

Rick didn't waste any time getting to that old shack behind Miller's pond. But when he got there, Susie was nowhere to be found. He tried calling her name but never got a response.

*Where in the hell is she?* he said to himself. So he started looking around the place. Now, what everyone called a shack was actually an abandoned two-bedroom house. Weeds had long ago taken up residence along with a few dozen spiders and snakes. As Rick slowly made his way through the overgrowth, his eyes caught what appeared to be a person's leg. "Susie? Is that you?" he called out. But there was no response. But as he got closer, he knew that it was in fact Susie. At first, he just stared at her lifeless body lying there on the dirty floor. He could see that her dress was torn and that there was a small trickle of blood running down from the corner of her mouth.

"Oh my dear god!" he said as he bent down over her body. But as he tried to roll her onto her back, Rick got the first clue that everything wasn't what it appeared. "Susie, can you hear me?" he asked her.

Suddenly, her eyes threw open, and her left hand came down across his right cheek, leaving four very deep nail marks down his right cheek. Caught totally off guard, Rick lost his balance and fell backward into the wall. He was totally stunned as he placed his hand across his cheek. He wasn't one bit surprised to find that it was covered with blood.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" he yelled at her.

"With me? You just tried to rape me!" she yelled back.

“You’re crazy, you sick bitch!” he yelled back.

“Yeah, we’ll see who the cops believe when they see my dress and those very incriminating scratch marks across your face,” she told him.

“You are crazy, so why are you doing this?” he asked.

“Well, because you’re going to help me get rid of Katie, or I’ll turn you into the cops,” she told him.

You are crazy. I won’t do it. You can go hell,” he told her.

“Yeah maybe, but you can go to prison. Do you know what they do to a rapist in prison, Rick? Well, do ya? They rape them, Rick, that is, if they don’t kill ya first,” she told him.

“You’re going to blackmail me with that if I don’t help you break Katie and Rick up?” he asked her.

“I didn’t say anything about breaking them up. I said you’re going to help me get rid of her once and for all,” she told him again.

“And what do you mean by getting rid of her exactly?” he asked her even though he knew exactly what she meant.

“I think it’s time for little Ms. Goody Two-Shoes to have an accident,” she told him.

“My god, you are sick! What do you think will happen then? Do you really think Mike will fall in love with you? He hates you just about as much as I do right about now,” he told her.

“So what’s it going to be there, Rick? Do you help me, or do you get raped in prison? The choice is all yours,” she told him.

“Well, as I see it there is only one choice to make,” he told her.

“And what would that be, my dear Rick?” she asked.

“Go call the cops bitch, and while you’re on the way, there’s one more thing for you to do,” he told her.

“And what would that be?” she asked

“Go screw yourself!” he told her as he got up and staggered out of the house.

*Okay, Susie, Rick is a much better friend than I gave him credit for, so on to plan B. I’ll just have to deal with Katie myself,* she told herself as she sat there on the dirty floor and readjusted her dress. “Damn it!”

Rick walked into the soda fountain while holding a paper towel over his face. As he sat down across from Mike and Katie, it was Katie that asked him first. “My god, Rick, what happened to your face?” she asked.

And with that, Mike looked up at Rick.

Rick slowly spelled out everything that had happened from the start to the very bloody end.

“Susie did that because I’m with Katie?” Mike asked.

“Yeah, and to make it worse, I don’t know if she still intends on calling the cops or not. Hell, I might even get arrested before this day is done,” Rick explained.

“That does it! If the bitch wants a fight, I reckon she’s got one coming,” Katie told them.

“No, you’re not. You heard what he said. She wants you to have an accident. That means she plans on killing you, so you stay away from her. Do you hear me?” he asked her.

“Are you telling me what I can do and what I can’t?” she asked.

“I promised your daddy that I would protect you, and that’s exactly what I intend to do. So, yes, sweetheart, I am telling you what you can’t do,” he told her in a very harsh and firm voice. And Katie knew that he meant it, so she decided not to question him any further.

“So what do we do now? Do I go to the cops and explain everything before she does or what?” Rick asked.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea. If you go to the cops, then they’ll question her, and what is she going to say? I don’t think she’s going

to admit that she set you up. No, she'll go ahead with her claim of attempted rape, and with those marks on your face; they'll have to arrest you. So I think it might be wise to let it ride itself out and see what she does. But I do think it would be wise to have a talk with somebody of authority, like maybe Father Mathews. Someone would, if required, testify on your behalf. And I think I'm going to pay a visit myself to Susie's dad after work tomorrow. Him and I have dealt with Susie and her stupid stunts before. So he knows all about her and her crap," Mike told them. "This time Susie has gone way too far."

"Rick, you might want to go see a doctor too. Those look pretty deep," Katie told him.

"Yeah, I already figured I would do that. But, Katie, you watch your back. This girl is one hundred percent psycho," Rick warned her.

"I will, Rick. And I'm so sorry that she decided to bring you into all of this," she told him.

"No need to apologize, Katie, it wasn't none of your doing. If it wasn't you, then it would have been some other girl instead of you," Rick replied.

"Okay, I'm going to handle this once and for all," Mike said.

"And just how do you plan on doing that, may I ask?" Katie asked.

"Well, you're right. Rick does need to go to the hospital, but we're making a quick stop on the way there," Mike replied.

"A quick stop? Where?" Rick asked.

"We're going to see Susie's dad. Him and I have been dealing with Susie's crap for years, but he needs to see what his daughter has done," he told them.

"But what can he do? Apparently, his daughter has gone off the deep end. She's way past any point of normal intervention guidelines," Katie added.

"Well, maybe, but I'm pretty sure that he'll handle her once and for all. You don't know him like I do. And the best part is Susie doesn't either. So how did you get here, Rick? Where's your car?" he asked.

“Outside. Where’s yours?” Rick answered.

“Mine is at home like always. Give me your keys. I’ll drive,” Mike told them as he stood up. But Katie and Rick just sat there. “Let’s go, guys, I want to try and beat Susie to her house.”

As they all climbed into Rick’s car, Katie asked, “Do you think her daddy can stop her and these stupid games? I mean, really? The girl definitely needs some medical help. You know, like a shrink.”

“Oh yeah, because of reasons that I can’t go into right now, he has too. Don’t worry, he’ll handle it. Trust me,” Mike said as pulled Rick’s Chevy away from the curb.

The drive to Susie’s took less than ten minutes. As they walked up to the front door, Mike told them, “Let me do the talking, okay?” The other two both agreed. Mike rang the bell. Susie’s dad answered the door.

“Hey there, Mike, what a pleasant surprise. Come on in,” he told them as he opened the screen door to let them in.

He watched as they all came in past him. Then he saw Rick’s face. “My God, son, what happened to your face? You look like you tangled up with one nasty bobcat,” he told him.

“He did, a bobcat named Susie,” Mike told him.

“My Susie did that? Are you sure?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah, we’re sure,” Mike replied.

“Well, Susie isn’t here right now, but I expect her anytime. Let’s get something on that,” he told them as he yelled for his wife to come downstairs. “So tell me what happened and how my Susie is involved.”

Rick started to tell him the story, but he stopped him. “I’m sorry, son, but let’s have Mike tell me. I need you to hold still while I work on these gashes. Okay?” he told him.

Rick agreed. Just then, Susie’s mom came down the stairs.

“Oh, Mary, good, we’re going to need some hot water, some clean rags, and bandages and get me that ointment that the doctor gave me a few

months back. Would you do that, dear?" he asked her.

"Sure, what happened? You tangle with a mountain lion or something?" she asked.

"Yeah, or something. Would you get me what I asked for, please?" he pleaded with her. "What happened, Mike?" he asked. Mike waited for her to leave. Then he started telling him everything that had transpired over the past few days, including Susie's run-in with Katie at the soda fountain. But when he got to the part about the shack at Miller's pond, he made sure not to leave out any of the details. And he never stopped even when Susie's mom had returned with the items that her husband had asked for. She had the right to know too, and Mike made sure not to leave anything out. When he finished, he could tell that they believed every word Mike had told them. He could see it in their eyes.

"So where is Susie at right now?" Mike asked him.

"Well, I thought that she was going to Rick's. I mean, she told me that you two had a date or something. But I guess that was a lie too, wasn't it?" he asked.

"No, I guess that part of it was the truth. But you can see what she called a date and what she is capable of, can't you?" Mike asked him.

"I'm so sorry to all of you. This should have never have happened. So what can we do now, you know, to try and fix this mess?" he asked.

"Well, first off, you can reassure Rick here that he isn't going to jail, and I need your word that nothing—and I mean nothing—is going to happen to Katie here," Mike told him.

"Oh, I can promise you all that this will stop right here, right now. And nobody is going to jail even though I think it might help a certain person who isn't here right now. And to you—you must be Katie—I give you my word that no harm will come to you. I'm so sorry for all of this," he proclaimed.

"It's not your fault. You had no way of knowing," Katie told him.

“Yeah, I did. This has been going on for years. I should have stopped it back when it first started. But I didn’t. God, please forgive me. And, son, I’ll handle any medical expense over all of this, okay?”

Just then, the back door to the kitchen opened, and you could hear her. “Daddy? Where are you, Daddy?” Susie yelled.

Everyone looked to see what he was going to do.

“I’m in the living room, dear,” he yelled back to her.

You could hear her moaning and crying, tryin’ to play the part of the helpless victim. But that all changed the second she walked into the living room and found out that they had some unexpected guests, some very much unexpected guests.

“What are they doin’ here? And you, you tried to rape me. My daddy will see that you go to jail for a very long time,” she said as she pointed at Rick.

Her dad and mom just stared at her in total disbelief. Nobody said a word.

“Susie, shut up! Just shut up. It’s over. Your mom and I know everything,” her father told her.

“Then you know that he tried to rape me, Daddy, don’t you?” she asked.

Nobody said a word. They just waited.

“What? You believe them over me? I’m your daughter. Mom, you believe me, don’t you?” Susie asked.

But her mom didn’t answer. She just turned her head.

“What did you tell my parents, you sons of bitches?” she yelled the three of them.

“Susan Marie, you watch your language. You might act like a tramp outside of these walls, but in my house, you’ll conduct yourself like the lady. Is that clear?” her father stormed back at her. “What in this world have you become? You’re not the sweet little girl that we raised into a lady. Just

look at this boy's face. I said look at it! He'll have scars for the rest of his life all because of you. And all of this over a boy that just wanted to be friends!" he yelled at her.

"They're lyin', Daddy. Don't yell at me. He did, Daddy. He tried to rape me. Mommie, Daddy?" Susie cried as she looked for someone that might be on her side. There wasn't anybody.

"It's over right here, right now. Do you understand me, young lady. It's over. Forever!" her dad yelled at her.

"But, Daddy, I swear I didn't do whatever they're sayin' that I did. Goddamn it, listen to me!" Susie yelled.

Susie turned to look at her mother just as her mother's hand came crashin' along the side of her face. Susie wasn't expecting it at all. The force knocked her off balance as she fought to stay on her feet. She just looked at her mom with a look of total disbelief as she held her hand over the side of her face.

"You will not use the Lord's name in vain, not in this house! And if you ever do it again, you're going to remember what a good bar of soap tastes like," her mother told her.

"Well, if you're not going to call the cops on Rick, then I will. I'm telling you the truth. I swear, Daddy," Susie proclaimed.

"Go ahead, call the cops. If you're that stupid, then by all means, go right ahead. Because I'll tell them the truth. And you'll be the one going to jail, and not this fine young man. So go ahead, you know where it is," her dad told her.

"I hate all of you!" she screamed as she ran up the stairs to her room.

"Good 'cause I'm not too fond of you right now either!" her dad yelled back.

Mike started to stand up when Susie's dad turned and looked at him.

"I know that you know about what Mr. Petersen told you. I'm not proud of it, but it is what it is. So this will all remain here between us, right? I mean that is why you came here, isn't it?" he asked.

"I came to the one person that could handle all of this without the authorities being involved. Your little situation had very little to do with it. But I will say this, and I think that I'm speaking for all of us, thank you for doin' what you knew had to be done as far as your daughter goes," Mike told him.

"Well, you're all welcome, but if you'll excuse me, I need to go pull a few switches off of the tree. Someone needs a whipping, real bad," he told them as he walked out to the kitchen and went out the back door, leaving the three of them alone with Susie's mom.

"We're so sorry that all of this had to happen this way," Katie told her.

"Please stop! What is a mother supposed to say when she finds out that her only daughter, or only child for that fact, is not only capable of such thoughts but being capable of acting those sick acts out against another human being or, worse, against a friend? Please leave us alone to deal with Susie on our own terms, okay?" she asked them.

"Sure, we understand. We'll be going but I'd like to know that you and your husband are going to be okay after we leave," Mike told her.

"Oh, you're worried about the switches? Don't worry yourself. He's more than likely just outside on the porch, trying to figure out where we went wrong. Trust me, we'll be fine. Susie might deserve a good switchin', but I think she might be a little too old for it, you think?" she asked them.

"Well, I think I'll let you two figure out the best answers for yourself. Thank you again, and we're really sorry it had to come to this. Mike told her as he walked outside with Katie and Rick right behind him. As they walked to the car, all of them felt a little relief and even more regrets that they had to confront her parents like that. And Katie was surprised to find out that she was really worried about Susie too, but she didn't know why.

About ten minutes after they had left, Susie's dad came in the house with several heavy-duty switches from their tree.

"These will do the job I bet ya," he told his wife.

"You're really going to whip her with those nasty things?" she asked him.

“Well, I figure if we had used them earlier, then we more than likely wouldn’t be where we are now, would we?” he told her as he headed up the stairs.

And she knew that he was right as usual.

Rick dropped Katie and Mike off at the entrance to Matterson House. They offered to go with him to the hospital, but he decided just to go home instead. As they walked up the walk, Katie asked, “So what did you know about Susie’s father that made him help us?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing really, but it’s not important. What’s important is that you’re safe,” he told her.

“Oh, Michael, you’re so sweet, always putting me first. You’re a true southern gentleman,” she said.

“Yeah, well, I do have my moments, I guess. I’m only doing what’s right. But you know, that even with everything that Susie did, or was planning on doing, I kind of feel sorry for her. I mean to be in her shoes must be very painful indeed,” he told her.

“I know what you mean. I felt sorry for her too, still do in fact. But she needs some serious help. I mean, she was talking about causin’ me to have an accident and all,” she answered.

“Yeah, true, but look at it this way, right now she needs more than having some doctor asking her what makes her tick on the inside. What she truly needs right now are some good friends,” he told her.

“If you’re hinting around about me being Susie’s friend, the answer is no. ‘Ain’t going there. You saw what she did to Rick’s face. ‘Ain’t giving her a chance at mine,” she replied.

“Of course not, I was just saying what she needs,” he answered.

“Well, I would hope not. You have to remember that both of her parents called it as they saw it. Her dad thought Rick had tangled with a bobcat, and her mom said a mountain lion, remember? They painted a very accurate

picture of her stalking her prey and then pouncin' on it for a kill," she told him.

"Well, you're right, but her and I have been friends a long time, and I feel sorry that there's nobody on her side, is all," he added.

"Well, feel sorry for her if you want to, but do it from a distance. Wild animals are just that—wild," she pointed out.

Grady was standing on the porch watching them as they stood there talking. "So are you going to stand there all night or just most of it?" he asked.

"Oh, hi, Daddy! No we're just talking about some personal stuff," she told him.

"Hi, Grady," Mike added.

"Hello there, son! So what are you two talking about that's so gosh darn important?" Grady asked.

Katie and Mike filled Grady in on everything that happened, excluding the part about Susie wanting to harm Katie. Daddies don't need to know everything all the time. Grady took it better than Mike had expected, well, almost.

"She did what to his face? Sounds doggone nasty if you ask me," he told them.

"Well, thanks to my knight in shining armor our dealings with Ms. Susie Barnes is over and done forever," she told him.

"Did you say Barnes? Like B-A-R-N-E-S?" he asked.

"Yeah, Barnes. Why do you ask?" Mike asked.

"Oh, no reason, but her dad wouldn't be a banker or associated with the banks, would he?" Grady asked.

"Well, yeah, but how did you know that?" Mike asked.

"Well, I'll be darn, it's a small world, ain't it? He never said anything about Columbia, South Carolina, by chance did he?" Grady kept pushing for more information.

“Well, now that you mentioned it, I do recall Susie saying something about Columbia, but I’m not sure. But where are you going with this, Grady?” Mike asked right back.

“Well, let’s just say that if I’m right and this is the right Barnes, your little tiff with the Barnes ain’t over, not at all. In fact, it may very well be just getting started,” he told them.

Katie knew what Grady was talking about, but Mike had no idea whatsoever.

“Okay, you’ve got me. Just what are you talking about? I don’t like being left out,” he told Grady.

“I can’t tell you anything just yet. Got some more figurin’ to do, but soon, I’ll be able to tell you everything, okay?” Grady told Mike.

Mike started to ask him again, but Katie cut him short. “Mike, you’ll just have to put your faith in my daddy. Trust me. I know. When we’re ready, I’ll tell you everything. I promise. Please don’t ask, okay? My daddy knows what he’s doing, and for your sake, you have to be left out in the dark for a little while longer. Okay?” Katie told him.

“So you know what he’s talking about?” Mike asked her.

“Yes, I know almost as much as my daddy does, but I can’t tell you, not yet. I want to. I really do, but I just can’t,” she told him.

“Michael, how would you like a chance at rewriting history, American history?” Grady asked him.

“Rewriting American history? But how?” he asked.

“Well, if what Katie and I know is true and we find what we’re looking for, the history of America, or at least the South, will be rewritten,” Grady told him.

“Just what in the Sam Dickens are you two getting at? If you find what you’re looking for? What could you possibly be looking for that will somehow rewrite American history?” Mike asked again.

“Okay, I’ve already told you way too much. But if you give me a few more days, I’ll explain everything to you, everything. Deal?” Grady asked.

“You’re not going to tell me any more, are you? Even if I beg?” Mike asked.

“Not even if you begged like an old coonhound, and Katie won’t either. So please just trust me, okay? All I’m asking for is a few more days. But you have to promise me that you’ll tell nobody, not even your parents,” Grady insisted.

“It’s that big, huh? Rewrite American history? A few more days, what can I do but say okay I guess? But you know, my mind is wanderin’, don’t ya?” Mike asked.

“Yeah, I’m sure it is, but not in the right direction I’ll bet ya. I promise you that if what my daddy has is true and we can put it all together, it will stir up some very dark secrets about a lot of people,” Katie told him.

“Like the Barneses?” he asked.

“Yeah, like the Barneses. You especially can’t tell them. They may very well be at the heart of all this, and they might even kill to keep it quiet. So like I said, if you think your little tiff with Susie is over, it may very well not be,” Grady told him.

“Wow, now I’m really interested, but I really can’t tell anyone about anything that I know nothing about now, can I? Did that come out right? You two have my mind going ten different directions at one time. I’m totally confused,” Mike told them.

“Good. Glad to hear it. However, I’m still not going to tell you anymore, but nice try,” Grady added. “So about your sister’s party, I’m planning on having it on Saturday ’cause most folks work and all. So how does that sound?”

“Oh, that’s fine. Speakin’ of which, are you still going with me to the depot to meet her tomorrow?” Mike asked Katie.

“You couldn’t keep me away even if you wanted to. Ya still want me to go, right?” she asked him.

“Oh, yeah. I think Mom already filled her in about you and me. So I think she will be expectin’ ya,” he told her.

“Really? Okay, now I’m nervous,” she said.

“Don’t be. Just be you, and Melissa will love ya just like I do,” he told her.

“Michael, you’re so sweet to say so, so I’ll try to look pretty,” she said.

“Well, ya surely won’t have to try very hard. You’re pretty without any effort,” he told her.

“Gee, and tell me again why I love you so much?” she asked.

“Well, now that I think about it, it is getting late, so I’m going to call it a day and go home. And I’ll see you tomorrow morning about nine. The train arrives at ten. Okay?” Mike told her.

“What? You’re leavin’? You weren’t done telling me how much you love me,” she said.

“Well, if I were going to do that, I guess I would never be able to leave ya,” he replied.

“Katie, let the young man go home for Pete’s sake. God, you’ll be seeing him soon enough. He ain’t going anywhere but home, so let him go already,” her daddy told her.

“Yes, Daddy,” she answered, then she turned to face Mike. “My daddy told me to let you go, but I’ll be at your house at nine o’clock sharp. You’d better not be sleeping,” she told him.

“I know, I heard him. He’s standing right there, and no, I won’t be sleepin’. Good night, Grady. You’ll have me thinking about American history all night, might not sleep a wink tonight,” he pointed out.

“Well, if I’m right, a lot of people are going to go without sleep for a long time. Good night, son,” Grady told him.

After Mike and Katie kissed each other good-bye, Grady and Katie watched him walk out of the gate.

“Okay, Katie, we have some work to do. Come on,” he told her.

“Did you find something else, Daddy?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah, a lot of interesting stuff.”

# Melissa's Homecoming

The house was abuzz with activities as everyone fought to get ready. Nobody heard Katie as she knocked on the door. So she banged a little bit harder.

"Hey, somebody get the door. I think it's your girlfriend, Michael!" his mother yelled downstairs.

Mike flew from the kitchen to the front door and found Katie standing on the front porch just staring at him with her arms crossed.

"Michael, now you know that it's not very polite to keep a lady waiting, don't ya?" she asked him.

"I'm sorry. Everyone is running around like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off, and we're trying to get ready and all," Mike answered.

"You did, didn't ya? You overslept. I knew you would," she said with a smile.

"Yeah, well, if I did it, would be you and your daddy's fault now, wouldn't it? I was up all night thinking about what we talked about, you know rewriting American history and all," he said in his defense.

"Well, that may or may not be true, but don't you think your sister deserves two socks that matched?" she asked him. He looked down to see a brown sock and a black one.

"See what you did to me? Come on in while I finish getting dressed. Mom is in the kitchen, and there's some fresh biscuits if you're hungry, so help yourself. I'll be just a moment," he told her as he flew up the stairs.

Katie walked into the kitchen where she found Annabelle sitting at the dining room table. She was the only one that was dressed and ready.

"Well, good morning, Katie. My, don't you look nice in the dress. Did you make it?" Annabelle asked her.

“Oh, no, not me. I can’t hardly sew on a button, but my daddy ordered it through one of those catalogs, and just like that, six weeks later, it came in the mail,” Katie told her.

“Well, I only ask because it fits you so well. It’s very cute, and I just love the bow across the back,” she said.

“Well, thank you very much. But I do wish to ask you a personal question if I may. I mean, woman to woman since it’s just the two of us, and the menfolk are busy getting ready and all,” she told her.

Annabelle sat her coffee cup down and told Katie to have a seat. “So what’s the problem? Is everything all right?” she asked.

“Well, it is right now, but I’m really worried. It’s Melissa. I’m afraid that she—well, what if she doesn’t like me or something?” Katie asked her.

“Child, relax. She’ll love ya. And it would not surprise me one bit if you and her soon became the best of friends,” Annabelle told her.

“Really, you think so? I really like your son, but I’m so nervous that . . . well . . . it just turns my stomach. I just don’t want to mess anything up,” Katie told her.

“Well, first off, I’m not blind, Katie. I’m a mother. And as a mother, I can see things, and I know when something is happening to my children. And I can tell you right now that what you and Michael have goes a lot deeper than just liking each other. Ever since he met you, he’s been on cloud nine. But as far as his sister, Melissa, goes, you don’t have a single thing to worry about. Okay?” Annabelle told her.

“Well, I’m sorry. I didn’t think my feelings for Michael was all that apparent, but I do love him. He makes me feel things that I’ve never felt before. Do ya know what I mean?” she asked.

“Sure I do. And those feelings that you’re having, honey, that’s love. Kind of exciting, ain’t it?” Annabelle asked her.

“Oh, yes, but do you really think he loves me too? I mean, this is all really new to me and all, but it’s scary too at the same time,” Katie explained.

“Well, honey, you’ll just have to put your faith in God and follow your heart. You two will be fine. Trust me, okay?” she asked her.

“I will, I promise. But I’m still really nervous about meeting Melissa for the first time and all,” Katie told her.

“What are you nervous about?” Mike asked.

Katie spun around in her chair to find Michael standing behind her. “Meeting Melissa,” Katie answered back.

“What’s to worry about? You’re the most beautiful woman in the world. Next to you, Mom, I mean,” Mike said as he glanced over at his mom.

“Oh, Michael,” Annabelle told him.

“It’s okay. All boys think their mom is beautiful, but I’ll have to agree with Michael. And I’ll never object to being second to you,” Katie told Annabelle.

“You two want something, don’t ya?”

“I’ll take one of those biscuits,” Michael told her.

“Sure, but just remember one thing,” she answered.

“And what would that be?” Mike asked.

“Next time, butter up your biscuit, not your mother,” she told him.

“Very funny,” Michael told her as he started laughing.

Just then, Mike’s father walked into the kitchen. “Are we all ready?” he asked.

“I think so. I wouldn’t want to be late,” his wife answered.

“Doesn’t really matter. I mean, it’s all a conspiracy, ain’t it?” Katie told them. All three of them just turned and looked at Katie with a questionable look on their faces.

“What’s a conspiracy?” Mike asked.

“Trains. Well, busses and boats too, I suppose,” Katie told him.

“What?” Michael asked her.

“Look at it this way. Why is it if you’re on time, the train is late? But if you’re late, then the train is on time. Sure sounds like a conspiracy to me,” she answered.

Mike’s dad just started giggling. “You know, I’ve never thought about it before, but I do believe that you might be right. It sure sounds like a conspiracy to me too,” he told her.” Come on, ladies, we’re fighting a conspiracy,” he said with a slight hint of humor to his voice.

All four of them walked out of the house, and each of them took their seats in the family car, a very shining green Oldsmobile. As Mike’s dad turned the key, the engine came to life. Nobody said a word as the Oldsmobile made its way through the Tuesday morning traffic. They arrived at the train depot with ten minutes to spare. As they entered the depot, one look at the board that held the posted arrival times confirmed the conspiracy. The train was running a half hour late.

“See, just like I said. It’s a conspiracy,” Katie told them.

“Well, I guess you were right, so I guess we’ll just have to wait for a while. And, Katie, may I say that you look simply stunning today,” Mike’s father told her.

“Well, thank you so very much, and may I say that your daughter will be proud to have such a handsome man as a father,” she answered.

He answered with just a huge smile on his face. As they found an empty bench and took a seat, they started the half hour waiting game.

“So I hear that you guys are throwing a welcome-home party for Melissa,” Mike’s father asked.

“Oh, yeah, this Saturday at Katie’s house,” Mike told him.

“Oh, did Mike tell ya all about our banjo showdown between Mike and myself?” Katie asked both of Mike’s parents.

“That’s why you pulled your banjo out of the storage closet. I was wonderin’ why you did that,” Mike’s mother said.

“Storage closet? I thought you said that you were good at playing the banjo?” Katie asked Mike with a discouraged look on her face.

“Oh, he is, but he only played with Melissa, and ever since she went away to college, I don’t think he’s touched it very much,” Annabelle answered her.

“Mother, I can defend myself? Please! Yes, Katie dear, I am good, but no, I haven’t touched it since Melissa left,” Mike said.

“Well, all I can say is I hope you get all of the cobwebs off it before Saturday,” Katie told him.

“So is this showdown just between you and Mike, or can anyone join in?” Mr. Gibbes asked.

“Well, I reckon if you want to join in, that would be all right. You play the banjo too, Mr. Gibbes?” Katie asked back.

“Please call me Frank. Yeah, I do, but I play a meaner fiddle than the banjo,” he answered her.

“Well what good would a southern get-down be without a fiddle? In fact, the more musical instruments we have, the better the music. Well, that’s the way I see it at least,” Katie said.

“Agreed!” Frank answered. “This should be one hell of a shindig. Good friends, good food, and some really good southern heart-pickin’, foot-stompin’ music. That’s one heck of a homecoming,” he added.

“Well, even without all of that fanfare, I just be glad to have my daughter back home if only for a little while,” Annabelle added.

“Can’t argue with that. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it, dear?” Frank said as he looked at his wife.

“One day is too long to be without your child,” Annabelle replied.

Just then, they announced the arrival of Melissa’s train on track four. Katie tried to stay behind them as they walked down the wooden platform that led to the train, but Mike wouldn’t let her.

“What are you doing? Come on up here,” Mike told her.

“I’m okay. I’m right behind ya,” Katie answered.

“Well, maybe so, but my girl walks at my side, not behind me,” Mike told her.

Katie hurried her stride to catch up but still stayed behind Mike and his parents, just not as far.

As they reached the first door of the first car, they stopped and watched as people started exiting the train. But there was no mistake when she exited the car. Melissa was a spitting image of her mother, tall and slender with the longest jet-black hair that Katie had ever seen. Truly a very beautiful woman indeed, Katie thought to herself.

“Mother, Father!” Melissa said as she ran up and threw her arms around her mother’s neck. Her mother returned the hug. Then she turned to her father, giving him even a bigger hug.

“How’s my favorite girl?” her dad asked her.

“I’m good, Daddy, just happy to be home,” Melissa answered. Then she saw her best friend in the world. She released her father from her hug.

“Michael,” she said in a soft sincere voice.

“Melissa, glad to see ya,” he told her.

“Yeah, yeah, give your sister a hug,” she demanded. Mike and Melissa fell into a very affectionate hug. Katie stood silent as she watched the reunion unfolding before her. Yes, she was still very nervous.

Melissa stood up straight and smiled. “I missed all of you so much. It’s so good to be home,” she told them.

“Well, we’re just as glad to have you home, little sister,” Mike said.

“Little sister?” she asked.

“You’ll always be my little sister, just not as little as you once were,” Mike told her.

But Melissa didn’t hear him. Her attention was locked on someone else. She took her hand and pushed her brother out of the way. She stood there staring at Katie. Now, Katie was nervous.

“And you, you must be Katie,” Melissa said.

“Hi, Melissa . . . I’m so glad to meet you,” Katie responded.

“Mother, you said that she was cute, but this girl is just beautiful.” She turned and looked at her brother.” This cute adorable thing is your girlfriend?” she asked him.

“Melissa, I’d like to introduce the love my life, Katie. Katie this is my sister, Melissa,” Mike said.

Melissa just turned and looked at Katie. “Forget about him. It’s truly a pleasure to meet you, Katie,” she said.

“Well the pleasure is all mine,” Katie told her. The two young ladies gave each other a very friendly hug. Katie wasn’t nervous any longer.

As they walked back to the car, Melissa and Katie walked next to each other, talking and comparing their dresses and the way that they did their hair and other silly girl stuff. Mike and his father followed behind with Melissa’s luggage. Annabelle walked next to her husband empty-handed. She looked at the two young ladies walking in front of her.

“You’re a very lucky man, Michael. Now you’ll have two beautiful women to hang around with,” she told him.

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” Mike replied. But in the back of his mind, he was wonderin’ just how lucky he really was. *God, I hope she doesn’t tell Katie all of my secrets*, he thought to himself.

When they got back to the house, the two ladies were still locked into their conversations. And every once in a while, they would both turn and look at Michael and laugh and then turn away.

*Yep, she’s telling her everything*, Michael thought. *Oh hell!*

As they entered the house, the small talk soon ended. And without anybody saying anything, everyone just knew that Katie and Melissa were soon going to be the best of friends, very good friends indeed.

“So what do you have planned for today?” Annabelle asked Melissa.

“Just relaxin’ and unpacking,” she answered. “And, Michael, I’m going to steal Katie for a while. She can help me unpack. I have the cutest dress that would look simply grand on her,” she told him.

“Well, that, my charming sister, is all up to Katie. You’ll have to ask her,” Mike answered.

“Well, how bout it? Would you like to help me unpack?” Melissa said as she looked at Katie.

“Sure, I’d love to,” Katie replied.

As the two young ladies started up the stairs, Melissa turned and looked at Michael at the bottom of the stairs. She held up her closed fist and extended her thumb up into the air, giving Michael the sign of her approval. The two ladies disappeared upstairs, but every once in a while you could hear them laughing.

“Sounds like your sister has a new friend, doesn’t it?” asked his dad.

“Yeah, it certainly does at that.” Mike replied.” So can I ask you and Mom a question?”

“Sure, son, what’s on your mind?” his father asked him.

“So what do you two think of Katie?” he asked them.

“As far as I’m concerned, I don’t think you could find any girl that’s more charming and loveable, and you’ll never find a girl that’s any prettier. She’s simply, in one word, adorable,” his father told him.

“I agree with everything that your father said, but I’ll add this—she’s worried about making an impression, and I told her just to be herself, and she would be fine,” his mother added.

“When did you talk to her?” Mike asked.

“That, my son, is a secret that you don’t need to know. Katie can tell ya if she wants to,” his mom told him.

“Wow, okay. Gee, I was only asking a question.” he said.

“Well, son, if Katie is going to have a future in this family, as I think she might, you’ll have to understand that Katie is going to talk to me as often as she thinks she needs to. And those conversations are between me and her. And that, my son, is all I’m going to say on the subject,” she told him.

“You really think that she’s going to have a future in this family?” he asked.

“Why, yes, I do. Why? Don’t you?” she told him.

“Well, I never gave it much thought, is all,” he answered.

“Like hell you haven’t, Michael,” his father jumped in. “I’ve seen how you look at her and how she looks at you. Your mother and I aren’t blind, Michael. And neither is Katie. In fact, your sister has already told me that she saw it too, and she hasn’t even been home that long yet.”

“Is it that obvious?” Mike asked.

“Does the sun come up every morning?” his father responded.

“That much, huh? I didn’t think it showed that much,” he answered.

“Well, it does,” his father replied.

Upstairs, the two new friends were getting along with each other, better than Katie ever expected that they would.

“So what are you studying in school?” Katie asked.

“My major is American history. I want to be a teacher,” Melissa answered her.

“American history? Wow, that’s very interesting. Are you studying all of it, or are you specializing in a certain period?” Katie asked.

“Oh, all of it. I think the history of America is simply mindboggling. Picture this, America started off as just thirteen colonies, and it grew into this great land that we live in now. I’ll love to see what the future holds. The possibilities are endless,” Melissa told her.

Katie wanted to tell her about her secret, but she knew that she couldn’t. Not yet anyway. Heck, she hadn’t even told Mike about it yet. So telling his sister just wouldn’t be right.

“So I get it that you really like my brother. Is that true?” Melissa asked.

“Well, we’ve only known each other for a couple of days, but I really think that I’ve fallen for him. Is that all right with you?” Katie asked.

“Well, I saw the way that he looks at you. I have no problem with my brother being happy. In fact, I’m really happy for him. Well, for the both of you, I should say,” Melissa answered.

“Well, I’m glad that you’re okay with it. It really means a lot,” Katie told her.

“Well, all I can say is welcome to the family,” Melissa told her.

“Thanks, I’m glad to be here,” she answered.

“Good. Now look at this dress. This would look so good on you,” Melissa added.

# Something Not Right

Grady looked around the huge house, and something suddenly dawned on him. Someone had been tearing up this old house. Several of the rooms had their floorboards torn up, and several of the numerous rooms had their walls torn down as well.

It wasn't like the normal decay of an old house. It was as if someone was looking for something. Grady knew that when a house sat empty for a long time, a lot of nails would work their way loose. He didn't know why this happened, but he knew that it did. It's as a hinge—when you use it, it works as it was supposed to. But quit using it for a while and suddenly, it would be jammed. But the opposite was true with nails. As long as you walked on the floors, everything was fine and dandy. But stay out of that room for an extended period of time, and several of the nails would somehow lose their grip. But this wasn't the case here. These nails and planks were deliberately pulled up. But whoever was ripping up this house was jumping from room to room.

Grady sat there scratching his head. Was it possible or could be possible that someone other than him and Katie knew about the secrets that this house was supposed to contain. And if there was someone else that knew the secret, how could they have known? The secrets that this house held were over one hundred years old. Who else could possibly know the secrets that this house held? Secrets that could very easily rewrite the history of America and the South. Could there be someone else that was searching for the very thing that had brought him and Katie to Matterson House in the first place?

Grady knew that from this moment on, the two of them would have to keep their secrets to themselves. They might not even be able to tell Mike even if they wanted too. It might prove to be a really bad idea. But he did have one relief from all of this. Whoever had been searching through Matterson House hadn't been there in years. And that was a good thing. He just hoped that it stayed that way for a very long time. The longer the better.

But it didn't make much sense. Whoever was searching through this house couldn't be looking for the same thing that he was, could they? After all, what Grady and Katie were looking for was supposedly hauled away in eight wooden wagons. It was a massive move, so why would they be looking through the walls? Surely, it wouldn't or couldn't be hidden in the walls or under the floorboards. Or could it? But still, it was apparent at least to Grady that they had been searching for something. But what? he wondered. He had no idea.

# Susie's Dirty Tricks Revealed

Mike stood outside of Melissa's bedroom. The door was closed, but he could hear the voices from inside. He knocked on the door. Melissa opened the door.

"Yes, what can I do for you, brother?" she asked him.

"Could I speak to you for a second?" he asked her.

"I guess so, but I'll tell ya right now. Katie is a sweetheart if that's what you wanted to know," she told him.

"Well, thanks. I'm glad that the two of you are getting along so well, but I really need to talk to you," he said.

Melissa just stood there staring at him as she slowly opened the door and let him into the room. Katie was sitting on Melissa's bed surrounded by several piles of clothes. Michael shut the door behind him. He took a seat on a chair in the corner of the room.

"What I'm about to tell ya has to stay between the three of us. Mom and Dad can't know, okay?" Mike told her.

"Okay?" Melissa said with a very questionable tone to her voice. "What's up?"

"It's about your friend Susie Barnes," Mike told her.

"What has she done now?" she asked.

Mike and Katie slowly explained to Melissa everything that has happened in the past few days in regard to Susie Barnes. Melissa sat there totally shocked beyond belief as they told her about the events of the passing days.

"She did what to Rick's face?" she asked in a very concerned voice.

"She ripped his face open with her fingernails. They're really deep," Katie told her.

“You’re kidding. Is he going to be all right?” she asked.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine, but he’s more than likely to have scars for the rest of his life,” Mike told her.

“That bitch has gone psycho. And she threatened to hurt Katie. Oh, she’s gone way too far this time. And all you did was to wave the ring in her face?” Melissa asked Katie.

“Well, honestly, I did say a few sarcastic things to her as well but nothing that would justify what she did. Especially to Rick. He wasn’t even a part of it,” Katie told her.

“Oh, I believe ya, but if I confront her, I want all the information ahead of time. Right before I knock the bitch on her ass. Rick and I dated a few times. He’s a real nice guy. But this is just wrong, dead wrong,” she proclaimed.

“Well, Katie and I wanted you to know before you ran into Susie and heard a different story,” Mike told her.

“Yeah, we’re telling you the truth,” Katie told her.

“Relax, Kate. If there’s one thing that I do know, it’s that my brother has never lied to me. And I don’t think he’s about to start now. Ain’t that right?” she said as looked at her brother.

“You know that’s true. Never have, never will,” Mike confirmed what Melissa had said.

“Well, that’s nice to know. But I know that you and Susie are the best of friends, and I’m . . . well, an outsider,” Katie told her.

“An outsider? Not even. You’re my brother’s girlfriend, and that alone makes you almost a member of the family. And while Susie might have wanted to be where you are right now, you’re the one that’s here. And that, my dear, carries a lot more weight than whatever Susie had or thought she had,” Melissa told her.

Katie felt relieved that Melissa would choose her side over Susie’s. And for the very first time, she truly felt like a part of Mike’s family.

“But you haven’t told Mom and Dad?” she asked.

“Didn’t see a reason to worry them, especially with the threats over Katie’s life. Besides, what could they do? Nothing, so why bother them with such nonsense?” Mike told her.

“Big brother, like always, you used your head. I agree. Mom and Dad don’t need to know about all of this shit. But just wait until I see Susie. I’ll straighten her out. Yeah, completely horizontal,” she proclaimed.

“Well, I need to ask you not to do that. We’ve already handled it, and you might just be starting things up a bit,” Mike told his sister.

“Excuse me, you just want me to let her go?” she asked.

“Yeah, I do. Please let it go. Okay?” he asked.

“I’ll make you a deal. I’ll let it go for now. But if she does anything, then I get to finish it. Okay?” she told them.

“Okay, I can live with that I guess.” Mike replied.

“Katie, are you all right with this?” Melissa asked her.

“Okay, but if you’re not around, then I will finish it. Okay?” Katie told her.

“Fair enough. Okay, since that’s out of the way, what do you say that the three of us go down and get a malted?” Melissa asked them. “It’s on me.”

Mike and Katie both agreed, and after telling their parents, the three of them headed down the sidewalk. The normal ten-minute walk took almost forty-five minutes. It seemed that Melissa had a hell of a lot of friends, and she had to say hi to all of them. Finally, they made it to the malt shop, but it would take Melissa almost a half hour before she finally sat down in her seat.

“God, it so nice to see all of my friends again,” Melissa told them.

“I guess. Did you miss any of them?” Mike asked with a laugh.

“Oh, very funny,” she snapped back.

“Gee, I wish that I was that popular,” Katie told her.

“Honey, you hang around me for the three weeks that I’m home, and you’ll have more friends than you can shake a stick at,” Melissa told her.

“Now that sounds like a blast. I’d love to. That is, if Mike doesn’t mind?” she asked.

“Well, if you never find out anything else, you’ll find out this—you’re safe with my sister, so no I don’t mind not at all,” he told her.

As they talked, none of them noticed the figure that had stopped in front of their table. Melissa was the first to look up. “Rick, how the hell are you?” she asked as she stood up and gave him a huge hug and kiss.

Rick, without hesitation, returned the favor. “Pretty much worse than when you saw me last,” he told her.

She could see that the side of his face was covered in bandages.

“Yeah, they told me what that bitch Susie did to your face. I’m so sorry, Rick,” she told him.

“Ain’t your fault, but thanks anyways,” he answered.

“Hey, come on. Sit down here with us. We have a lot to catch up on,” she told him.

“Well, thanks! I think I will.” Then he stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Melissa asked.

“Oh, nothing, but I seem to have forgotten just how beautiful you were, and you haven’t changed one bit,” he told her.

“Oh, you smooth talker, sit down.” So he did, and as he did, Melissa moved closer to him.

Rick didn’t object, not at all. “Hi, Mike, Katie! So what’s up with you two?” he asked.

“Oh, Katie, has a new best friend, so I’ve been demoted to second billing,” Mike told him.

“You haven’t either!” Katie told him as she playfully slapped his shoulder.

“Aww, is poor little Mikey jealous of his baby sister?” Melissa asked jokingly.

Katie jumped in to change the subject. “So who are you taking to the picnic?” Katie asked.

“I don’t think I’ll be going,” he informed them.

“Why not?” Mike asked.

“Well, to be honest, I don’t think a girl wants to be seen with me because of this crap on my face,” he told them.

“The hell you say. I’ll go with you, Rick. Consider it a date, and you best not stand me up,” Melissa said.

“Really? That would be great! Thanks. And I would have to be really stupid to stand such a beautiful woman up,” he told her.

“Not if you know what’s good for ya,” she told him as she planted a kiss on his good cheek.

They all laughed.

“Rick, did someone tell you that they wouldn’t go with you for that reason?” Katie asked.

“Well, not in so many words, but girls that I’ve dated before suddenly had other plans. Even a blind man could read the writing on the walls,” he told them.

“Well, it’s their loss and my gain,” Melissa told him.

“I agree. Those brats don’t know what they’re missing,” Katie told him.

“Great! Now you two are dating again?” Mike said.

“So what’s wrong with that?” Katie asked.

“The last time these two dated, I served duty as their personal messenger. Tell Melissa this, tell Rick that. You two damn near drove me nuts,” Mike answered.

“It wasn’t that bad, and besides, now you have this cute little thing to keep you busy,” Rick told him as he pointed toward Katie.

“You’re a sweetheart of a man, Rick,” Katie answered back.

“Yeah right, up until you mention snapping turtles,” Melissa added.

“Oh no, you aren’t going to tell Katie that story, are ya?” Rick asked.

“Sure, why not? She needs to know,” Melissa told him.

“No, she doesn’t. Come on, I hear enough about it from you two. Ain’t that enough?” he asked.

“Okay, wait a second. Snapping turtles? Come on, Rick, I’d like to hear this. I promise I won’t laugh, but it does sound funny. Snapping turtles?” Katie pleaded with Rick.

“Well, she’ll tell ya anyways, but you promise not to laugh?” Rick asked her.

“I promise. Cross my heart,” she told him.

“Well, the summer that we graduated from high school, the three of us went down to Florida, and to make a long story short, we went to the beach and went swimming. So there we are having a blast when I made the mistake of telling these two here that I thought something had bitten my foot. Then Melissa told me it was probably the snapping turtles, then Mike acted like something bit his foot. Then little miss innocent here started splashing around like she was being attacked by a whole bunch of these snapping turtles. She even disappeared under the water like these turtles had pulled her under—”

Mike cut him off in mid sentence. “And Rick ran to the beach like his ass was on fire. He flew! It was funnier than hell, I tell ya,” Mike added.

“Yeah, funny for you maybe. I felt like an ass,” Rick finished. He looked over at Katie who was really trying not to laugh. “You said that you wouldn’t laugh,” Rick told her.

“I’m sorry, Rick,” she said with her hand half covering her mouth. “But I do have one question, Rick,” she added.

“Yeah, I bet you do. What is it?” he asked as he waited for what he knew was coming.

“Why didn’t you just reach down and rub their bellies?” she asked.

“What? Are you serious?” he asked.

“Sure, but the only problem with that is by the time you find them to flip them over, you wouldn’t have any fingers left,” she told him as she started laughing.

“Oh, real funny,” he answered.

“No, seriously, it doesn’t matter. The ones in Florida don’t have any teeth,” Katie told him in a very straight face.

“Really, why not?” he asked as seriously as he could.

“Because they’re too old. They’re retired. That’s why they’re in Florida,” she told him as she busted out laughing. The laughter from their table filled the malt shop.

“You better keep her, Michael. That was good, real good,” Melissa told her brother.

“Ha ha ha! I’ll get you, Katie! You wait. Oh, I’ll get ya. Count on it,” Rick told her.

“Okay, I’ll count on it. At least I still have my fingers,” she snapped back.

“Oh, look out, Rick. She’s on a roll,” Mike warned her.

Just then, Mike motioned that someone else had entered the shop. It was Susie Barnes. Katie couldn’t believe that she had the nerve to stop at their table as if nothing had ever happened. But she did. She stood there as if she owned the damn place.

“Hi, Melissa, I heard that you were back in town, and I was wondering if you would like to have a malted with me?” she asked.

Everyone around the table just sat there and waited. Finally, Melissa answered her. “Sure, I’d love to. Pardon me, Rick, could you let me out please?” she asked.

Rick stood up without saying a word, especially to Susie. As Melissa and Susie walked over to an empty table across the room, Rick sat back

down.

“I can’t believe your sister would still speak to that tramp, let alone sit with her and enjoy a malted,” Katie told Mike.

“I can. I know my sister,” Mike said as he watched the two girls across the room. “Just wait for it. It’s coming.”

“What’s coming?” she asked.

“Just watch. You’ll see,” he answered her in a very quiet voice.

Melissa bit her lip as Susie rambled on about herself. And as far as that deal, as she called it, with Rick, that was nothing more than a big misunderstanding. Melissa waited for the malteds to get to the table. Then she interrupted Susie. “First off, Susie, you’re a fucking bitch for what you did to Rick and what you tried to do! Second off, you’re not my friend! You’re a sick pathetic brat. And if I ever hear that you said as much as hi to any one of them, I’ll leave school and come down here and kick your ass. Is that clear?” she asked her in a voice that they might have heard outside.

“Wait for it. It’s coming,” Mike said in a low whisper.

Susie didn’t say a word. She was too scared to say anything.

“And you did say that these malteds were on you, right? Well, honey, you don’t know how right you were.” Melissa told her as she slowly poured both of the malteds over Susie’s head. Susie still didn’t say anything as everyone in the shop stared at her then busted out in laughter.

“I told ya it was coming,” Mike said in a voice that was louder now.

As Melissa started walking back toward Rick’s side of the table, everyone started cheering for her. Apparently, Susie didn’t have that many friends, and she had just lost one more.

“Oh my god! She did it! She really did it. Your sister is the greatest. God, that was fantastic,” Katie proclaimed as she glanced over at Susie. The thick chocolate malts were slowly running down her face, over her shoulders, and filling up what little cleavage area she had, and even more of the ice-cold malts found their way into her lap. But she still didn’t say

anything. She just sat there enjoying a double chocolate malted. Or so it appeared.

Melissa slid back into the booth with a grin on her face that could only be described as devilish in nature. Rick sat down next to her again.

“Melissa, that was great. Did you see the look on her face?” Katie asked.

“The bitch had it coming. And besides, I wanted a vanilla malt,” she said with a slight hint of laughter. “Nobody treats my friends like that, especially Susie Barnes. Gosh darn bitch.”

“You knew what you were going to do even before you accepted her offer, didn’t ya?” Rick asked her.

Melissa stared at him and answered him with all of the southern accent that she could muster, “I do declare, my dear sir, whatever do you mean, sir? I swear, they just slipped, is all. I mean a lady such as I am would never do anything like you’re thinking, sir. After all, what kind of a lady do you take me for?” she said just before she busted out laughing. The others soon joined her in the laughter.

Susie slowly stood up. Most of the chocolate malted fell to the floor, but a good amount still clung to her. On the outside, she looked like the receiver of a very bad joke. But on the inside, deep down in the pit of her stomach, she was fuming. What she wanted to do was to go over to that table and punch Melissa right in her nose. But she knew that this wasn’t the right time. Revenge would be hers. *Oh, yes, Ms. Melissa, I will be back, and that little bitch Katie, I’m not through with you either*, she thought to herself as she slowly walked toward the door. The laughter of everyone there helped to make the walk even longer. Revenge would be sweeter than chocolate. And she would savor its taste until the timing was right.

The four of them sat there talking for about an hour before they decided it was time to go home. Rick was going to walk Melissa home while Mike did the same to Katie. Once outside, they parted company, and each couple went their separate ways.

Mike and Katie just laughed as they strolled down the gravel road that led to her house. Neither of them had any idea about what was being plotted against them. As far as they were concerned, Susie Barnes was a thing of the past.

Susie sat there on her bed, still wearing the chocolate-covered dress. She sat there with her legs crossed in what most people considered to be the Indian stance. Her hands slowly rubbed the huge metal object that she had snuck out of her daddy's room the day earlier. Her eyes just stared at the adjacent wall, but they didn't see anything. The hate that was slowly building inside of her was about to burst. And as she looked down at the gun in her hand, she really didn't care anymore.

# The Plot Is Fully Explained

When Katie and Michael finally got to her house, Grady and Katie ushered him into the kitchen. He took a seat at the dining room table. “Michael, Katie has convinced me that we should bring you up to date on what we have thus far,” Grady told him.

“Are we talking about this history stuff that you guys told me about last night?” he asked.

“Yeah, exactly. But I wanted to wait a few days, but Katie here wants you to know now, so I guess we’ll tell you everything now. So can you keep a secret?” Grady asked him.

“Sure can. Besides, the suspense is killing me, okay? So please tell me what you’re talking about,” Mike told them.

“Okay, Michael, you’re about to get a lesson on American history, but as I tell you this, I’ll need you to keep an open mind and disregard everything that you thought you knew before. All of this is documented by one of the actual people that participated in the actual events that I’m about to unfold for you. Can you do that, keep an open mind I mean?” Grady asked him.

“Sure, I mean, I’ll try to,” Mike told him.

“Good, that’s all that we can ask of you. Katie, would you please be so kind as to bring us some tea? We might be here awhile,” Grady asked her.

“Sure, Daddy,” she told him as she headed for the kitchen.

“Okay, son, here we go. Rewriting history as you know it.

“I’m sure that you’ve heard the story about how General Sherman marched across Georgia during the Civil War and how he left a path of destruction in his wake, haven’t you?” Grady asked.

“Sure, everyone knows that story,” Michael replied.

“Well, now, you’re going to know what really happened.

“Now in early December 1864, General William Tecumseh Sherman had just finished his infamous March to the Sea, right through Georgia. Behind him, they left a path of destruction sixty miles wide. His sixty-five thousand troops destroyed everything in their path.

“And now we know that somewhere around December 29, the mayor of Columbia made the suggestion that they should fortify the town. His suggestion did not get the response that he had hoped for. But the history books tells us that at least one person had the foresight to see what was coming. And I’m fairly certain that he was not alone in his thoughts. Either way, the other heads of the city decided to throw a huge three-day party instead.

“Which, if you think about it, it was really stupid. Here they are in the middle of a raging war, Sherman and his troops are advancing on to their town, and they decide to throw a party. Doesn’t make any sense if you ask me, but that’s what they did.

“Now you have to remember that as far as Sherman was concerned, Charleston wasn’t worth attacking. Years of naval bombardment had pretty much destroyed the town. And whatever was left wasn’t worth their effort.

“Now, Michael, do you know why South Carolina was so important to Sherman as far as a military target goes?” he asked.

“No, not really,” he confessed.

“Well, South Carolina was the birthplace of the Civil War. It was South Carolina that first introduced the idea of seceding from the Union. And they were also the very first state to do so. Of course, we now know that six other states quickly followed. But it was in South Carolina that the idea was first heard. It was also in South Carolina that the very first shots of the war happened. On April 12, 1861, the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina.

“So the North pretty much blamed South Carolina for the war itself.

“And because of its large railroad system and the ability to build arms, clothes, and other items that were required to support the Confederate forces, Columbia stood out as the more valued target in the entire South.

“So when you take a nation like ours was back then and toss them into a civil war where brothers were often seen fighting each other, where families were ripped apart over some stupid line in the dirt, you can see why the Union officials wanted South Carolina, especially the capital, Columbia, destroyed. Mainly because they were considered to be the cause of everything.

“Now, when Sherman was just days away from Columbia, two guys that for now we’ll just call JB and DW, decides that if the Union Army was going to take what belonged to the people of the South, then they would beat them to the punch, so to speak.

“I have here two letters that were written between these two guys. In these letters, they were more or less planning on stealing the treasures of the South and putting the blame on Sherman and the entire Union Army,” Grady told Mike who just sat there taking all of this in.

“So they planned on stealing the gold for themselves? Wow, did they get away with it?” Mike asked.

“What does your history books say? That alone should answer your question,” Grady told him.

“Well, I’ll be. They did do it. But whatever happened to all of that gold?” Mike asked.

“Well, first off, nobody ever said that it was gold. It’s always been assumed that it was, but there’s never been one shred of evidence either way. But I think you’re trying to get ahead of my story. So relax, we’ll get there soon enough.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m just getting all caught up in this. This is truly interesting,” Mike replied.

“You haven’t heard anything yet. But I’m about to hand you some papers, but you have to be very careful with them. After all, they’re almost one hundred years old, okay?” Grady told him.

“Okay. Wow, a hundred years old?” he proclaimed.

“Yeah, but just wait until you read these.

“This first one was written February 10, 1865, just seven days before Sherman entered Columbia. It was written by a guy that we’ll call JB to a man that we’ll call DW. Yes, I do know their real names, but I’m saving that for later. Here, read this,” Grady told him as he handed him the hundred-year-old document.

Michael took the letter and slowly started reading it.

*DW,*

*I think that is apparently clear, as you so boldly stated as well, the South is in fact falling. And when it does fall, everything that we have, or the South has, will fall into Union hands.*

*So it is extremely urgent that we move on this at once. Gettysburg was a disaster, Savannah has surrendered, and it’s clear that Lee is losing. The South will surely fall.*

*So we need to act on this without haste. Sherman is coming. I know this and so do you.*

*So time is one thing that we do not have.*

*We must take what is ours to keep it out of the hands of the North.*

*I also suggest that we set fire to certain buildings after Sherman’s arrival. The blame will fall on the North while providing cover for our actions.*

*Your response is urgently requested.*

*JB*

*February 10 1865*

“So what do you think now?” Grady asked him.

“Well, I’ll be damned. So they set the fires just to cover their tracks? Very clever,” Mike replied.

“Well, we will never know exactly which fires were started by whom, but I bet ya that at least two of the fires were started by these two guys. And both of the fires were started in each of Columbia’s banks. They were the

Bank of Charleston and the Commercial Bank of Columbia, both of which were burned to the ground. Now consider this theory of mine. You have over sixty-five thousand Union soldiers in the capital of South Carolina. Many of them are pretty drunk as the nighttime rolls around. They see the first sign of the first fire. What would you do if you happened to be one of those soldiers?" he asked Michael.

"Putting myself into the state of mind that they must have been, I would probably start more fires. Especially if I thought for some reason that the first fires were set under Union orders," Mike replied.

"Very good deduction, son. So if what you just said is true, and we'll never know if it is or isn't, then these two guys would be the cause of the destruction of Columbia, and not an order from Sherman that never existed because it was never given in the first place. But remember that in the back of your head, and I'll continue with the story.

"Now a little bit of information for you to remember as well. Nobody in the South ever thought that Columbia would ever fall to the Union, or if it did, it would go unharmed like Savannah did. So there were a lot of people that sent their own personal property to Columbia for safekeeping. Hell, even other government officials sent their own property plus state property to Columbia as well. Anyways, in the second letter, written three weeks after Sherman had fled the city. They talk about what they have done and tells of the location of whatever it is that they took. Are you ready for this?" Grady asked.

"What do you mean are you ready for this?" Mike asked.

"Here, just read the letter. It will explain a lot," Grady told him as he handed him the hundred-year-old note.

*JB,*

*After having done what we have, God help us if we were wrong in our actions. We watched Columbia burn to the ground, and I cried. Such a beautiful city, and I feel like we're to blame. But we did what we knew had to be done.*

*Our cargo left Columbia as planned on eight covered wagons under the cover of darkness. It is hidden at a place called Matterson House. It will be safe there. Nobody will look for it there. And like we planned, Sherman and his troops are being blamed for everything.*

*You and I are the only two people that know what we have done as all of the others have been eliminated. You and I are the only people alive that know where it is hidden. Guard this with your life.*

*The following clues will lead you to the cargo's location.*

*Squares turned to diamonds,*

*From the roof's peak.*

*Be careful of your steps,*

*If it's the treasure that you so seek.*

*Please contact me by messenger, and I will meet you at Matterson House.  
Long live the South!*

*Signed DW*

*March 10, 1865*

Katie and Grady watched as Mike's eyes grew in size as he read the letter and then read it again.

"The treasure is here, in this house?" he asked.

"Well, I don't think that it's in this house, but, yes, I do believe that the entire fortune of the South is here somewhere on this land," Grady explained.

"Holy shit! Do you know what this means? You're right, this will rewrite history. This is fantastic," Mike explained.

"Indeed it does. We told you that it would be unbelievable," Grady told him.

"Unbelievable is an understatement," Mike proclaimed.

"Well, there's more to the story if you still want to hear it," Katie told Mike.

“There’s more? Hell yeah, I want to hear it,” he told them with so much excitement in his voice that he reminded them of a little boy in his first toy store.

“Okay but you’ll have to calm down a bit, okay?” Grady told him as he continued to explain everything to him.

“Now, we know for a fact who JB and DW were. We have their names on other documents to back it up.

“DW is, or was I should say, the president of the Bank of Charleston. His name was Dwight Watkins.

“But JB was the president of the Commercial Bank of Columbia. His name was Jason Barnes,” Grady told him as he waited for a response from Michael. He didn’t have to wait very long.

“Barnes? As in Susie Barnes? Are you serious?” he asked.

“Very serious. That’s why we couldn’t tell you anything until we confirmed the facts. But Jason Barnes was Susie’s great-grandfather,” Grady told him.

“Is that possible? I mean the Civil War was a long time ago, and—” Mike was saying as Grady cut him off.

“Yes, Michael, it is possible and it’s a fact. This is 1955, and Columbia was burned in 1865. Do the math. It’s only ninety years ago.

“The facts speak for themselves,” Grady told him.

“Wow, only ninety years ago. Doesn’t seem like it. I mean, it should be more, shouldn’t it?” Mike asked.

“Mike, America isn’t even two hundred years old yet. So ninety years ago isn’t all that long ago. Really,” Katie told him.

“I guess you’re right, but I’m in total shock. Wow, Susie’s grandfather ripped off the South? You know, I think you might be right. Our tiff with Susie isn’t over, is it?” he said as he looked at Katie.

“No, I don’t believe it is. I’m sorry,” Katie told him.

“Mike, would you like me to go on, or would you like to take a break?” Grady asked him.

“No, I’m fine. Please go on,” he answered.

“Very well. Okay now, as ironic as this may sound, Jason Barnes was killed exactly thirty days after Columbia burned. He was protesting Sherman’s actions that he knew weren’t true when the last remaining wall of the bank, the South wall, fell on him. Talk about blind justice. But Dwight Watkins caught the fever a few weeks later. Dwight and my grandfather were the best of friends. So he summoned my grandfather to his deathbed where he told my grandfather everything. Well, almost everything. He gave him a huge safe and told him that the proof of everything was locked inside. But he died before my grandfather could get the combination to the safe. The only bit of information that my grandfather was able to save was the riddle,” Grady told him.

“So it took you all this time to open the safe?” Mike asked in a tone of complete puzzlement.

“We’re not talking about a little safe, Michael. This thing weighs in at almost a ton and a half. And talking about tough? We must have beaten that damn thing silly for years. Never left a single mark on the damn thing. And considering what was supposed to be inside of this massive thing, we couldn’t use dynamite out of fear of destroying what was inside,” Grady kept on going until Mike stopped him.

“So how in the world did you get it opened then?” Mike interrupted.

“Katie opened it,” he replied.

“Katie opened it. But how?” he asked.

“I was sitting there one day talking to my daddy, and I was turning the dial this way and that way, and all of a sudden it went *click*. So I pulled down on the handle, and presto, just like that, it opened,” Katie explained.

“You’re kidding?” he asked her.

“Nope, afraid not. That’s exactly how we got it open. Ninety years of beating on this darn thing and nothing. Little Katie turns the dial for a mere

ten minutes, and it pops open. Don't figure, does it?" he asked.

"But I do have a confession to make, Michael," Katie told him.

"A confession? About what?" he asked.

"Do you know who my great-grandfather was?" she asked.

"It wasn't Barnes, was it?" he answered.

"Oh, hell no. But I know how you feel about the South and where your loyalty lies. But we can't have any secrets if we're going to be together, can we?" she asked him.

"No, but I would hope that you would trust me enough to tell me anything," he answered.

"Well, I do really, but I wanted you to hear everything before I popped it on you," she told him.

"So who's your great-grandfather, General Sherman?" he asked half laughing.

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, General Sherman was in fact my great-grandfather. Lucky guess," she told him as she waited for a response.

"But you said that you were raised in Mobile?" he told her.

"I was. But he was related to my mother's side of the family," she explained.

"Really? Wow, that's weird. I mean, what are the chances of that?" he asked

"So are you okay with that? I know that you're southern born and raised, and like a lot of other southern folk, you're more than likely forever loyal to the Confederacy. So knowing that Sherman's blood run through my veins, that doesn't bother you. Not at all?" she asked.

"Sweetheart, it doesn't change a thing. I still love ya. I'm in love with you for who you are, not for who your great-grandfather was or wasn't," he told her.

"Good. I love you too," she replied.

“Are you two lovebirds done? I’d like to finish this story sometime before morning,” Grady asked them.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Grady. I thought that you were done. Please continue, sir,” Mike said as he sipped from his glass of tea.

“We’re not the only ones that are looking for this treasure. My brother, Jack, took off some ten years ago in search of it. But all he had was the riddle. We never heard from him again. Jack was his given name, but everyone just called him Rings because he wore two rings on every finger. I told you this because someone went through this house searching for something. Was it the treasure? I don’t know. Was it my brother, Jack? Don’t know that either. But until we find it, I want to warn the both of you to watch your backs, okay?” Grady asked the two of them.

“Someone else, huh? Could it be Barnes?” Mike asked.

“It could be, I guess, but I really can’t say for sure,” Grady answered.

For the next couple of hours, the three of them looked over a stack of documents that Grady had found in the safe after Katie opened it. Nearly every paper bore the stamp of the Confederacy and was dated during the Civil War period. Among the stack of papers were several early etchings of Matterson House. Apparently, they were done throughout the entire building process. One picture showed the meadow that Matterson House currently sat on, but there was no building there. The next several pictures showed various stages of the construction process, from the bare frame all the way up to its completion in 1831. The last pictured showed Matterson House fully completed with about sixty people standing in front of the house. No notations were found that would tell them who these people were, but Grady assumed that it was the people that actually built Matterson House.

These etching of Matterson House would serve as a picturesque journey into the past when the huge cotton plantations were the talk of the South. The huge towering pillars of white, numbering six in all, welcomed the guests as they strolled up onto the huge wooden porch. Huge etched double glass doors lead into the parlor. Once inside, the guest would be welcomed by two spiral staircases with one leading off to the right while the other to

the left. A huge crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling two stories above. White marble floors with streaks of gold reached out from beneath the feet of the guest. Polished mahogany banisters followed the red carpets up the staircase to the floors above. In all, Matterson House had fourteen bedrooms, servant quarters, and a kitchen capable of cooking enough food for an entire army, which it had more than once. But most of all, Matterson House had one thing that most houses could never measure up to.

Matterson House had class, a symbol of Southern pride that will live as long as that house stood.

And for the very first time, Michael could understand what Grady had meant when he told him that this house had a history, some of it still unwritten to this day.

Before them, stretched out on the huge oak table, lay almost one hundred years of history. Document after document, from some military plans to old Confederate newspapers, all of these items retrieved from the old safe were worth a small fortune in and by themselves.

History has a way of coming back to bite you in the ass. And with the wealth of information these documents held, the South could come back with a vengeance.

“So do you mind if I ask a silly question?” Michael asked them.

“No, not at all. What’s on your mind?” Grady told him.

“What do you plan on doing with this treasure if you do in fact find it? It has to be worth a lot of money,” he asked.

“This isn’t about the money, Michael. The money belongs to the South. And it will be returned to the South. Katie and I are just trying to right a wrong. Katie’s great-grandfather has been blamed for this for nearly one hundred years. It’s time for the record to be set straight. We have a list of people who had their wealth in these two banks. And if possible, I mean if we can find the heirs to these people, we would return it to them. But there’s something else that you need to see, but this will require your absolute promise of secrecy,” Grady told him.

“Sure, I mean on top of this, what’s one more secret?” he answered.

Grady handed him a stack of papers. It was a list of depositors for one of the banks. Michael took the list and studied it.

“Okay, what is this?” he asked.

“Look at it, Michael. You can read, can’t you?” Grady told him.

Michael studied the stack of papers. Then he saw what they had wanted him to see. The list was alphabetical and under the Gs, there it was—Gibbes, Anthony G., Total Deposit: \$50,000.00

“Do you mean?” Michael asked.

“Yes, it does. If we find the treasure intact, your parents could receive some money from all of this. That’s your great-grandfather listed there. And like we said, we want to right a wrong by returning the money to the rightful heirs of those that suffered from the theft in the first place. But like I said, we have to find it first,” Grady told him.

“Okay, let’s say that it is here. And we find it intact. And you do as you say you are going to do. You return it all to the rightful heirs, and there’s nothing left. What are you getting from all of this?” he asked.

“Good question. First off we’re not in this for the money. I already have plenty of money. But we’re doing this just because it needs to be done. Period. No other reason, and I give you my word on that. Oh, I’m sure that we’ll get some type of compensation, but that’s not our motivation here,” Grady told him.

“Michael sweetheart, what if we don’t find it? Or it isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be. Then what? The most important thing for us here is the truth. Setting the history records straight. Okay, but you have to admit regardless of what we find or don’t find, the thrill is in the hunt. Isn’t it? I mean the possibility of finding a treasure of this size with that much history behind it, it gets under your skin and works at you. We could be standing on it as we speak. Think of that,” Katie explained.

“I see what you mean. It does work on you, doesn’t it? Okay, you’ve convinced me. So where do we start?” he asked.

“Katie tells me that your sister wants to be a history teacher,” Grady said.

“Yeah so? Oh, this would blow her mind, wouldn’t it?” Mike proclaimed.

“I’m sure that it would at that. So Katie and I have talked it over and have decided to let your sister in on all of this as well. But the decision to bring her into this is totally up to you,” Grady told him.

“Okay, so my sister wants to be a history teacher. I get that part of it. But I’m curious why would you want both of us in on this,” he asked.

“I’ll answer that for you, Michael. First off, you’re in this because of the way you treat me. I love you, and I know that you love me. So the choice is clear. But as far as Melissa is concerned, she’s only been here a short while, but she has accepted me into her heart and into your family as well. So if we bring her in, what does it do for us? The answer would be nothing except for maybe two more hands. But what it would do for her career? That would have to be seen. Melissa is a good woman with a solid heart. So you decide if she comes in or doesn’t. The choice is all yours to make,” Katie told him.

“And the two of you are okay with Melissa knowing all of this?” he asked.

“Sure . . . I mean if you two tell anyone, we’ll just have to kill the both of you,” Grady told him in a very stern and determined voice.

Mike just sat there with a look of disbelief on his face.

“Relax, son. I’m just kidding. We ain’t going to kill ya,” Grady said as he started laughing.

“Damn, Grady, I thought you were serious,” Mike said with a small grin on his face.

“Got ya, didn’t I? But in regard to your question, yes we’re fine with the two of you knowing all of this,” he told him.

“Well, I think Melissa would love to be included in this. In fact, I think she would be upset if she wasn’t,” he replied.

“Great then! We’ll tell her everything whenever we can get her over here. Okay?” Katie told him.

“How about tomorrow night then? Say right after work, is that okay?” Mike asked.

“That will be fine. I can’t wait to see the look on her face,” Katie said.

“Oh yeah, this is going to be good—no, this is going to be great.”

# Melissa Learns Their Secrets

Mike hurried home from work to find his sister waiting for him. He had told her last night that he really wanted her to go with him over to Katie's tonight right after work. He was glad to see that she was ready to go. So Mike took a real fast shower, dressed, and hurried downstairs.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Yeah. But why won't you tell me what this is all about?" she asked again.

"All I can tell you is that it's big, really big," he answered.

"So how big is it?" she asked.

"It will change your life, okay? So stop asking questions that I won't answer, okay?" he told her.

"So you know what it is, don't ya? Because you didn't say that you couldn't answer my questions. You said that you wouldn't," she boldly told him.

"Okay, that's it. Quit it. You'll just have to trust me. Period. Now, are you ready or what?" he asked her.

"That depends. Are you driving or am I?" she asked him.

"Well, if you promise to be quiet, I'll let you drive, okay?" he told her.

"Fine. I guess I'm driving then," she answered with a huge smile on her face.

And at that moment, he knew that his sweet, charming, lovable sister had set him up again. That shit-eating grin on her face confirmed that.

As they pulled up into the circular driveway of Matterson House, she just sat there staring at the huge house.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

“Oh, nothing, but I wonder how many people over the years had pulled up to this old house just like we just did. This house being so old and all,” she told him.

“I guess it would be a lot, a thousand or more I guess. But here’s the deal, sis, when you walk out of this old house, you’ll be in a very select group of people that knows what you’re about to learn,” he told her.

“Okay, I’m not driving home. So what is it already?” she demanded.

Mike refused to answer her, but instead, he got out of the door and walked up onto the porch and stood there waiting for her.

Are you coming?” he asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming. I just wish that I knew what I was getting into, is all,” she said as she got out of the car and joined him on the porch. Mike rang the bell.

Katie answered the door within seconds.

“What were you doing? Waiting for the bell to ring or something?” he asked her.

“No, silly, I heard the car drive up, is all. Come on in,” she told them.

“Katie my dear, would you please tell me why I’m here? He won’t tell me anything,” Melissa asked as she pointed toward her brother. Katie just threw Mike a questionable look.

“I haven’t told her anything. So she hasn’t a clue,” Mike told Katie.

Katie responded with a huge smile of understanding. “Sorry, Melissa, I don’t know either,” Katie told her as if she didn’t know anything. But Melissa knew better.

Katie lead them into the dining area where Grady had everything all laid out on the table.

“Well, hello there, Ms. Gibbes! How are we doing this evening?” Grady asked as he offered her a chair at the table.

“Please, Grady, just call me Mel,” she asked.

“Well, I reckon that I can call you whatever you wish me to call you,” Grady told her.

“Thank you, sir. Mel would be just fine then,” she answered.

“All right, Mel, what you are about to hear will change everything that you think you know about history. Well, at least about American history during the Civil War period, I reckon,” Grady told her.

“Oh, really now?” she said as she looked at Katie and Mike who had taken seats around the table across from Grady and Melissa.

“Yes, I know that you’re going to college to be a history teacher, but what you’ve learned so far will be nothing compared what you will learn in the next hour or so,” he told her.

“And where did you get your information, may I ask?” she inquired.

“All in due time. Everything that you are about to learn can be backed up with official documents from that period,” Grady told her.

“You have documents from the Civil War?” she asked. They could tell by the tone of her voice that he had her attention.

“You know what? Maybe, just maybe if you would be quiet for a few minutes, then Grady could explain everything to you. I promise you that you’ll be pleasantly surprised, okay?” Mike told her

“It’s okay, son. I want her to ask questions. Questions lead to answers, and we have a lot of answers, I reckon,” he told Michael.

“All right, everyone relax. I’ll get us some tea. Daddy, please start from the beginning,” Katie said as she started toward the kitchen. She stopped and whispered something into Melissa’s ear. Melissa just turned and threw her a big smile. Katie went into the kitchen. Mike followed her to help her with the tea.

He walked up behind her and gave her a hug and a fast kiss on the cheek. “Can I help?” he asked

“Grab four glasses, and thanks,” she told him.

“For what, carrying four glasses?” he asked.

“No, silly, for the kiss,” she answered.

When they returned, Grady was explaining to Melissa about Sherman’s March. Melissa was glued to each and every word that Grady told her. You couldn’t pry her away if the house was on fire. But when he got to the part about the letters and he handed the first one to her, they could see her eyes light up.

“Just wait until she reads the second one. This is going to be great,” Mike whispered into Katie’s ear. She just smiled.

Grady told her about the second letter. And Grady strung it out as long as he could. Then he handed her the letter and waited for her response.

A few moments passed as she read the letter. They could tell that she had stopped reading and had started reading it over again. Then she stopped and looked at everyone else sat at the table. There was a look of utter disbelief on her face. Then the look on her face changed to one of total excitement.

“It’s here. The treasure is right here? Oh my god!” she proclaimed. In her excitement, she almost slipped off of her chair. The three of them didn’t say a word. They just let her go on. It was very entertaining to say the least.

“This is fantastic. No, this is, well, I don’t know what it is, but oh my God,” Melissa rambled on.

“Melissa, are you okay?” Katie asked her.

“What? Oh, I’m sorry. I’m just—well, I can’t believe this stuff. This is really real right. I mean this isn’t a joke or—?” Grady cut her off.

“Yes, dear, it’s real,” Grady told her. “It’s all documented, and we have the original documents to back it up. But there’s more if you’re ready.”

“More? You’re kidding, right?” she asked.

Grady went on to explain about the lists of bank accounts and everything else. Melissa darn near went into shock to find out that her great-grandfather actually had a lot of money back then. While fifty thousand dollars was still a lot of money in 1955, back in 1865, it was really a great deal of money.

“So my—I mean our great-grandfather was rich?” she asked Grady.

“Well, it would appear that way. I reckon that much money back then would have put them up at the top of the social ladder. Right up there with all of the other rich folks, I reckon,” Grady answered.

Melissa stopped and turned to face her brother. “Don’t you remember Dad telling us that his grandfather committed suicide when he was just a boy? Maybe we just found out why he did it,” Melissa told him.

“Wow, I never put it together before, but I think you’re right. We’ll have to do some more checking,” he answered.

Melissa picked up the list of bank accounts and started looking through the names. There were accounts listed for Lee, Robert E.; Davis, Jefferson; Stephens, Alexander; Toombs, Robert; and the list of names continued on to include several hundred others. Then she just stopped and stared. “Grady, let me see the other list for the other bank, would ya?” she asked.

“Sure. Why? What did you find?” he asked.

“Son of a bitch!” she said as she compared the two lists.

“What, sis? What is it?” Mike asked her.

“I’ll be a son of a bitch!” she proudly proclaimed.

“All right already, would you please tell us what you found?” Katie asked.

“Are you sure these are right? I mean, they’re real, right?” she asked Grady.

“Sure they’re real. I told you that they’ve been locked in a safe for almost ninety years. Why, what is it?” he asked again.

“Okay, are you ready for this? This is so cool. I’m surprised that you guys never saw it before,” she told them.

“Sis, stop it. What in the hell are you talking about?” Mike demanded to know.

Melissa laid both lists out on the table. Both lists were open to expose the first of many pages. “There ya go. See if you guys see what I see,” she

told them.

Grady, Katie, and Mike stood over the documents, their eyes searching up and down the list. Katie saw it first.

“Oh my god!” she said out loud.

Melissa signaled for her to be quiet. “Let’s see how long it takes the guys to see it,” she told Katie.

“I can’t believe we missed it before. Come on, guys, it’s right there. Just look,” Katie told them.

“Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle! Hot darn! Damn! Right there and I missed it. I’ve looked at these darn thing over a hundred times, I reckon. Never saw it before. Good eyes there, Mel,” Grady told her.

“All right, guys, this isn’t fair. I don’t see anything,” Mike told them.

Katie leaned over his shoulder. “Read the names out loud to yourself. Start at the top of the *Bs* and see if you find it then. That’s how I found it,” she said.

They watched in deadly silence as Mike read each and every name on the list. Then they waited. He slowly read each and every name on the list out loud. But his voice got lower and lower.

“We can’t hear you, brother!” yelled his sister.

His voice got louder. “Books, William P., Booth, John W.—” he stopped.

“Booth, John W.? John Wilkes Booth?” he asked.

“Yeah, isn’t that weird? Why in the hell would an out-of-work actor have money in a Confederate bank? And not in just one bank but two separate banks and two separate accounts. And look at the deposit dates—April 14, 1865. That’s the day before Lincoln was shot,” Melissa told them. “This truly changes everything that we know, until now that is. I mean it was always rumored that Booth was hired by the South, but this more or less confirms it,” Melissa finished.

“So Booth was hired by the Confederacy after all. Hot damn!” Michael said in a very loud voice.

“Honey, you need to calm down a bit. We’re right here. There ain’t no need for yelling,” Katie told him, a huge grin on her face.

“I know, but this is some exciting stuff, you know,” he answered.

“Yes, Michael, we know. But it does make a person wonder what else we can find in these papers, don’t it?” Grady suggested.

# Saturday, Melissa's Party

All day Friday, Matterson House and its large grassy yard was abuzz with activity. There were countless tables and even more chairs. From the response to the invitations, it appeared that Melissa had far more friends than even she knew. There was expected to be almost sixty-five confirmed guest and at least half that many that was pending. Grady had no idea what he was getting into when he first came up with this brainstorm.

Everyone had agreed to bring some food, so that was being handled. But Grady still wanted to do his famous barbeque chicken with his special sauce. But he had never intended on cooking over four dozen of those feathered egg-producing chickadees. But what the hell, why not?

In the center of the yard, they had erected a stage. Almost every person played some type of musical instrument, so not to crack a pun, the stage was set. If the people over in Charleston listened closely, they might hear the best southern pickings ever.

At seven o'clock Saturday morning, people started to arrive. By nine o'clock, over one hundred cars and trucks of every shape, style, and color filled the pasture north of the house. It was fast turning into one hell of a shindig. A local bluegrass band started off the festivities with some pretty wicked pickings.

Mike and Katie wandered among the storm of people. A quick glance at his watch told Mike that it was almost time. So they started heading to the stage. Melissa was waiting for them at the stage.

"Who the hell are all of these people?" she asked.

"You don't know? They're supposed to be your friends," Katie said half yelling so she would be heard above the crowd of people and the music.

"I don't have this many friends, or at least I don't think I do," Melissa answered.

"Well, I hope you know at least a half of them. Hell, I only know maybe ten people so far, and three of them are standing right here," Mike

said.

“Well, ya both have me beat,” Katie said with a giggle.

About that, time Rick walked up to them. “Hey, am I in the right place?” he asked.

“Hey there, Rick. Yeah you’re in the right place all right. One hell of a turnout, ain’t it?” Mike answered.

“I didn’t know you had this many friends. Hell, this is just a welcome-home-from-college party, but it sure looks like your getting married or something!” he yelled to Melissa.

“Is that a proposal?” she asked.

“Maybe, I guess it depends on your answer now, doesn’t it?” he answered with a smile.

“We’ll talk about it later. It’s too noisy right now!” she yelled back at Rick.

Mike walked up on the stage. While he was pretty certain that he would have to do some serious yelling to get everyone’s attention, that wasn’t the case. In fact, as soon as he stepped up onto the stage, the crowd noise started to dissipate. Then it was quiet.

“First off, I’d like to welcome you all to my sister’s welcome-home party. And while I’m not sure who you all are, if you know and love Melissa as much as we do, then by all means, welcome to the party!” he told the crowd as they erupted into applause.

“We have some great entertainment here today, but if any of you want to come up here and join in on your instruments, then by all means, please do so. But in the meantime, there’s plenty of food, so eat up. And now, my very best friend in the world, you all know her by her given name, but I just call her my sister, Melissa,” he told them as Melissa stood up next to him.

“I’ll like to thank each and every one of you for coming. It really means a lot. I love you all. But we all need to thank one special person who put this all together before he even knew me. This is his house. So let’s say thanks to Grady Windslow!” she yelled to the crowd. The crowd was wild.

Grady just sat there in his chair next to the cooking birds. “It’s not Grady Windslow. It’s just Grady. How many times do I have to tell these people?” he asked himself.

“So let’s get this party going!” she yelled to the crowd. The band started playing again. Several people came up on stage with banjos and fiddles and a little bit of everything else. Sure, they were loud, but they all sounded great. The party was on. Melissa tried to go from table to table, but it wasn’t working. Someone always pulled her away. But still, it was a nice try. Mike and Katie sat next to his parents, just watching everything going on.

“Never knew your sister knew this many people!” Frank yelled to his son.

“Neither did she!” he yelled back.

“What was that?” Frank asked.

“Never mind, I’ll tell ya later,” he told his father.

Rick pulled up a chair next to Katie. “Is this seat taken?” he asked.

“Sorry, guy, that’s reserved for our friend Rick,” she told him.

“Well, if he shows up, I’ll leave. Okay?” he said as he sat down. “This is wild, ain’t it?” he asked her.

“A lot more than I ever dreamed it would be,” she told him.

“What’s this I hear about you and Mike fighting?” he asked.

“What? We’re not fighting! Who told you that?” she asked.

“I’m talking about the banjo thing,” he told her.

“Oh, that, yeah we’re going to do ‘Dueling Banjos.’ Have you heard it? It’s hot. Just came out a year or so ago. Everyone loves it,” she told him.

“That’s a rad tune. Can you pull it off?” he asked.

“You have better be more concerned about Michael. I can hold my own,” she told him.

“Really? Did Mike tell ya that he was state champion three years running in high school?” he asked.

“No, he seemed to have let that part out. Is he that good really?” she asked.

“Oh yeah, he is. He would have taken it the fourth year, but he let someone else have it that year,” he told her.

“Really? Who was that as if I didn’t know?” she asked.

“Melissa,” he answered.

“Gee, I would have never guessed that one,” she said with a smile.

“You’ll never find a brother and sister any closer than those two,” he told her.

“No kidding. It almost makes me wish that I had a brother or sister. Guess it just wasn’t meant to be,” she told him.

“Trust me, I know the feeling,” he said.

“So were you serious about what you said earlier?” she asked.

“Serious? About what?” he asked back.

“About you and Melissa getting married,” she answered.

“Aww, hell, I don’t know. I’ve loved her ever since we were kids, and we’ve dated off and on over the years. But marriage? Not too sure about that. Melissa is a very beautiful woman, there’s no doubting that, but I’m not too sure that I’m ready to settle down and have a family. Not yet anyways. Besides, what kind of life would we have with her being off at school and all? No, I’m not too sure either of us are ready for that yet. But if I were to get married, there’s only two women in the world that I would ever consider getting hitched to, and you’re already spoken for. So that leaves Melissa in a field all of her own,” he told her.

“Yeah. You know, I’ve thought about getting married and raisin’ a family. Hell, all women dream of that I’m sure. But I’m not ready for that yet. But I can see me living out my days with Mike. There’s something special about him. I can’t put my finger on it, or maybe it’s everything all rolled up into one nice little bundle. But if he ever asked me to marry him, ready or not, I think that I would say yes. But that’s just between you and I,

right? Don't see no reason to get Mike all worked up over it if you know what I mean. But I do love him—a lot," she told him.

"Relax, Katie. Your secret is safe with me," he answered.

"Good. Thanks, Rick," she said as she reached out and took his hand in hers. "You're a good friend, Rick."

Just then, Mike looked over at Katie and saw her holding on to Rick's hand. "Hey, what's going on here? Rick, you trying to steal my girl?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, we're going to run away and get married and have a hundred kids," Rick responded.

"Cool. Don't forget to send me a Christmas card," Mike answered back with a grin that could be described as humorous.

"Well, maybe we will at that?" Katie snapped back.

"State champion three years running, huh?" she asked.

Mike was surprised that she had found out his little surprise, then he glanced over at Rick. "Rick, you talk too much," he snapped.

"That I do, but I mean well. Besides, it's not like it was a secret or anything. Hell, everyone in town knows," Rick responded.

"Well, now everyone does for sure," Mike responded back.

Melissa was up on stage fighting to get everyone's attention. Finally, after some much repeated yelling, the crowd started to quiet down.

"Hey, ya all, having a good time?" she yelled to the crowd. They all responded with a very loud monstrous yes.

"Are you ready for some good old foot-stomping southern music?" she yelled out. Again, she got the same reply from the crowd.

"Good! Glad to hear it 'cause have I got a surprise for ya all. Ya all know my brother, Mike, right? Well, him and his new girlfriend, which happens to be the newest addition to our family, are about to duel it out on their banjos. So let's give a great big southern round of welcome to Mike and Katie. Come on, everybody, make some noise!"

The crowd was going crazy.

Katie looked at Rick. "Guess that's my cue," she told him as she stood up.

"Knock them dead, Katie!" Rick yelled to her as she headed for the stage. But he couldn't be sure that she had heard him over the roar of the crowd.

"Come on, Katie, your fans are waiting," Melissa yelled to her. Katie finally got up on the stage where Melissa grabbed her by the hand and pulled her to the center of the stage.

"Everybody, I'd like to introduce to you the very sweet, loveable Katie Windslow. Ain't she just the prettiest little thing?" Melissa yelled to the crowd.

Katie caught the hang of it rather quickly. "How ya all doing? Glad to meet all of you!" she yelled, and the crowd yelled back.

Mike came up on stage carrying both banjos. "Hey, everyone. I've just talked to the band, and they're going to sit this one out. Until we finish the dueling part at least. So, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, kick back and enjoy or stomp your feet and clap your hands. For this is 'Dueling Banjos' Southern style."

Katie led it off with Michael repeating everything that she played. They started off slowly then got faster and faster. Finally, they broke into a very fast picking session. They played as fast as they could and as hard as they could for nearly twenty minutes before the band joined in. The crowd was going nuts. They were lovin' it.

When it was finally over, the crowd got even louder. Neither one of Mike and Katie had missed a single note. Their battle was surely a tie.

Melissa yelled at the crowd. "Well? Was that great or what? I think it was pretty damn good myself!" she yelled to the crowd.

Nobody noticed that Melissa had a banjo too.

"Well, here's a little bonus for ya!" she yelled as she looked over at Katie and Mike. "Everybody, this time, it's time for some 'Rocky Mountain

Breakdown’!” she yelled to the crowd. “So all of you that know how to pick or strung or whatever you do to make music, get your butts up here. The rest of you can stomp your feet and clap your hands. Let’s wake up those sleepy people way down Texas. Can we do that?” she yelled.

The crowd yelled, “Hell yeah!”

“What? I can’t hear ya!” Melissa yelled back.

Again the crowd yelled, “Hell yeah!” This time, it was much louder.

After everyone was up on stage and ready, Melissa took control again. “Okay, Texas, it’s time to get your lazy asses out of bed!”

Melissa signaled to those on the stage as Melissa, Katie, and Mike started it off with the rest of the instruments jumping in. There were four banjos, five guitars, four mandolins, five harmonicas, and half dozen fiddles.

The music was loud, and it was good, the very best bluegrass picking session that the state of Georgia had heard in a long time. And as the song reached the middle, every group of instruments took center stage as the other instruments yielded to their moment in the spotlight.

It soon turned into a half hour of continuous, nonstop picking. The crowd was going crazy. And as the players took the banjos to a very slow closing, slowing with each and every strum of the strings, the crowd went quiet so they could hear each and every bit of the melody. But as the last note was heard. There were a few moments of total silence. Then the crowd went wild. It was a picture-perfect ending to a great song.

Katie, Mike, and Melissa put their instruments on their stands and left the stage. Those musicians left on the stage, including Mike’s dad, Frank, and his fiddle, continued playing.

The three of them walked over to where Grady was busy cooking the chicken.

“Grady, I thought you were going to join us,” Mike asked him.

“Aww, you kids did fine without me. The fingers aren’t what they used to be, I reckon. Besides the chicken needed tending,” he replied.

“Well, sorry you missed it,” Mike answered back.

“Didn’t miss a thing. You kids did a great job. I heard every note. So who won?” he asked.

“Well, I would say that it was a tie, but Katie won just because she’s cuter than my brother,” Melissa told him.

“I would have to agree” Mike replied.

“No really, I tried to outpick ya. I really did, but I just couldn’t. So I guess you were right. You are good. In fact, the only thing that you do better than picking a banjo is . . . well, kissing,” Katie told Mike.

“Well so are you. Grady was right when he said that you could hold your own against the best. And as far as the kissing thing goes, practice makes perfect,” he replied.

About that time, Rick walked up to where they were. “That, my friends, was great,” Rick told them.

“Why weren’t you up there with your fiddle?” Mike asked.

Rick just looked at him as if he was stupid or something. Then Mike realized that bandages still covered his jaw, which would make it nearly impossible to rest it on the instrument.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Rick, I wasn’t thinking. Maybe next time?” he told him.

“Ain’t your fault, but, Grady, what’s in this sauce? This chicken is out of this world,” Rick told him.

“Sorry, sonny, ain’t telling. Hell, I even had some southern gentlemen who was either thinking about or already had opened a store that sells nothing but chicken. Imagine that, a store that sells nothing but chicken. Ain’t going to work. What was his name? Sanders I think. He wanted to know what was in it too. Even offered to pay me for it. I told him that it just wasn’t for sale. Colonel . . . Colonel Sanders, that was his name. Nice guy, not too business savvy, I reckon,” Grady told Rick.

“Really? The colonel wanted your recipe?” Rick asked.

“Yeah, why do you know him?” Grady asked.

“Uuhhh, yeah, I read an article about a guy call Colonel Sanders who was selling franchises selling chicken, just chicken,” he explained.

“You’re kidding! The damn fool went and did it. Well, I’ll be. Just chicken you say?” he asked.

“Yep, just chicken,” Rick told him.

“Sounds like a pretty smart man. I bet he’s glad that he didn’t listen to me then, I reckon. Just chicken, never would have figured that one,” Grady said as he rubbed his chin.

For the next ten hours, the party raged on. There was singing, dancing, and a whole lot of good ole southern music. The last person left about ten o’clock that night.

Seated on the front porch were Grady, Katie, Mike, and Melissa. Melissa walked over and gave Grady a great big hug and a big kiss on the side of his cheek.

“Wow, what was that for?” he asked.

“For the greatest homecoming party a girl could ever hope for. It was fantastic, and I owe it all to you. Thank you, Grady,” she told him.

“Well, you’re very welcome, my dear. And thank you too, I might add. I hear that you and my Katie are fast becoming very good friends,” he told her.

“Your daughter is a very likable person. She’s kind of like a sister that I never had, so the pleasure is all mine for sure,” she told him.

“Well, you’re fast becoming a part of this family. Both of you have brought joy and love into this house, and I know that I speak for Katie as well when I say that our lives are better because of the two of you,” Grady added.

“Well, I know that my brother is deeply in love with Katie, so if they keep going like they have been, I wouldn’t be one bit surprised if she does become a member of our family faster than any one of us expects,” she told him as she looked at Mike and Katie.

“All right, you two, that’s enough of that. Whatever happens between me and Katie will be decided by me and Katie. We don’t need any help from you two,” Mike told both of them.

“Wow, a bit touchy, are we?” Melissa said with a smile.

“Not at all. Just stopping this before it goes any further, that’s all,” Mike explained.

“We’ve already talked about the future, more or less, with no definite plans, mind you, but we’re very happy right where we are at this present moment. Aren’t we, sweetheart?” Katie said as she looked for Michael to back her up.

“That’s right. I hate to bring this day to a close, but I really think it’s time for Melissa and I to be going—church comes mighty early. And I hope to be wide-awake when Katie does her solo tomorrow. Are you going to be there, Grady, to hear your daughter sing?” he asked.

“Haven’t decided yet, but I was thinking about it,” Grady told him.

“So you’ve decided to go ahead and sing your solo then? Great, do you know what song you’re going to do then?” Melissa asked.

“Yeah, I thought that I’d do ‘Peace in the Valley.’ I know that it’s not a church hymn per se, but its message sure is,” Katie replied.

“Good choice, I love that song. I can’t wait to hear it. But Mike is right. We really do need to get going. Grady, thank you once again, it was a beautiful party. Hell, you had my parents out there dancing. Never thought I would see that. Anyways, good night to both of you, and I hope to see both of you tomorrow in church,” Melissa told them as she grabbed her personal stuff and waited for her brother.

“We’ll see. Hell, a little church never hurt anyone, I reckon,” Grady answered.

Mike and Katie said a fast good night as she walked them to their car.

“Your dad is one in a million, Katie,” Melissa told her.

“Yeah, I know. I’ll see if I can’t get him to church tomorrow. Good night, you two,” she said as she closed the door of the car. Mike and Katie

kissed each other through the open window. “I love you,” they said to each other at very same time. They both giggled as Mike slowly drove away.

# Party of Her Own

While Mike, Melissa, and Katie were busy enjoying their party, Susie was busy planning a party of her own. Her plan was so damn simple that she wondered why she hadn't thought of it sooner. She had decided that killing Katie was unnecessary. But instead, she would simply make it where Mike wouldn't ever want to touch her again. It would be so damn easy. So she dressed in the most nondescript clothes that she could find. Just in case something did in fact go wrong, nobody would remember her. And she headed toward the worst part of town. Every city, every town had one, a section of town that was either discarded or undeveloped and left to fend for itself. Sure, there was a police present here on the trash-lined streets, but nothing as it should have been, or once was for that matter. The worse of the worse called this part of town their own. So she searched into the early-morning hours. From one sleazy bar and then on to the next, she looked for just the right type of guy to fill her need. It was one-thirty in the morning, and she was about to call it quits when she saw a bar that she hadn't noticed until then.

The place was a run-down building that more resembled a condemned building than an operating bar. The flashing neon sign outside above the door read "The Dive." One look and Susie knew without questions why someone had decided to call it by that name. Just the smell alone damn near made her throw up as she entered the front doors. She knew that she was indeed in the right place.

She took a table over in the corner and slowly studied every guy in the place. Then this waitress came over to her table. One look at this overweight, tattoo-covered, one-toothed, whatever she wanted to be called, made Susie's skin crawl. Her body odor told Susie that she didn't believe in bathing. Her name tag said "Baby," and Susie wondered what kind of sick animal it would take to give birth to someone like this baby thing that now stood before her.

She ordered a beer in hopes that she would leave her table quicker. Thank God that it worked. Then her attention turned to the guy playing

pool. She studied him. After five minutes, she knew that he was her guy. When the waitress brought her beer, she asked her to send the guy a beer and make sure he knew who sent it. She said that she would. Susie didn't have to wait very long. She watched as the waitress brought the guy a beer and pointed a finger at Susie. The guy tossed the pool cue on the table and joined her at her table.

His dirty, unwashed hair, his green teeth, and the same odor that the waitress had confirmed her thoughts—he was the one.

“Well, lookie here. What do we have here?” he asked.

“Relax, Romeo. I have a business proposition for ya,” she told him.

“You a hooker? I ain't got no money,” he said.

“No, I'm not a hooker, asshole! I've been sent here to recruit you and three of your friends for a special job,” she told him.

“I ain't got but two friends. Unless you count Leroy—no, wait, he died last week. Nope just two,” he answered.

“Fine, I'm sure that you and your two friends can find another friend, can't ya?” she asked.

“Well, never thought about it before. Maybe?” he replied.

“Fine, now before I tell you what this, I want your promise that this will be our little secret, okay?” she told him.

“Our secret, just between me and you. Can I tell my friends?” he asked.

“You can tell your friends but nobody else, okay,” she answered.

“What friends?” he asked.

“Your three friends that are going to help you,” she told him.

“Ain't got three friends, just two,” he told her.

She was getting pissed, and she was getting there fast. “Would you shut the hell up and just listen?” she told him in a very heated tone.

“Fuck you, bitch! Ya come in here and tell me you have a job for me, then ya yell at me,” he told her as he stood up and started walking away

from her table.

“It pays one hundred dollars,” she told him.

He stopped and spun around. “Excuse me?” he asked.

“You heard me. Now sit down and listen,” she told him. He sat down and didn’t say a word. When she was done, he just looked at her.

“Are you for reals? You’re going to pay me a hundred dollars just for having sex wit’ your friend. And this is her idea?” he asked.

“Yep, like I said, she getting married soon and wants to experience some really rough and nasty sex. But it has to happen soon ’cause she’s getting married, just like I said,” she told him again.

“But why will she be all tied up?” he asked.

“You’re not too smart, are you? It’s all part of the fantasy. To be forced into having sex with four guys at one time while she’s all tied up and can’t resist. Hell, that’s every girl’s fantasy,” she told him.

“Really? But isn’t that rape?” he asked.

“Not if you have a release form? It’s all legal. I’ll tell ya what she wants, you do it, and get paid for it. Everyone gets what they need,” she told him.

“And you have this letter. What did you call it?” he asked.

“It’s called a release form. So are you interested?” she asked.

“Depends. Is she cute? I mean, I do have my standards, you understand?” he told her.

Susie couldn’t believe that this guy had any standards at all. “Oh yeah, she’s cute all right. Trust me. You’ll love her,” she told him.

“It’s you, ain’t it?” he asked her.

“What? No, it’s not me,” she told him.

“You took one look at me and decided that you just had to have me, didn’t ya?” he asked.

Just the thought of touching this guy made her skin crawl, but to have sex with him, she would rather die.

“No, it’s not me. Here name is Katie. Look, you tell me how to get hold of ya, and I’ll let you know when and where, okay?” she told him.

“When do I get my money?” he asked.

“I’ll meet you once more with the release form and directions to where she’s at. I’ll pay you then. Okay?” she told him.

“Okay, but I still thinks it’s you. I could do you so good, make you squeal like a pig even,” he told her.

“Look, all you and your friends have to do is go to where I tell ya that she’ll be, rip her clothes off, and have your way with her. How easy is that?” she asked.

“Sounds like one sick bitch if you ask me. So what is it that she wants us to do to her?” he asked.

“Well, she’s about as sick as they come, trust me. And as far as what she wants, she wants it all. Anything that you can dream up, she’ll want it. Do it in her in the ass, in her in the mouth. Hell, two of you can do her at the same time as the other two watch and then switch places. She won’t care. Whatever you decide to do is just fine. But here’s the most important parts that you can forget. First off, don’t take a bath until afterwards. That means from right here, right now, none of you can bathe until afterwards. The smell just drives her nuts. And finally, in order to play the part of the damsel in distress, she’s going to be acting like she doesn’t want it. Don’t listen to her at all. It’s all part of the fantasy. Do you understand? This is really important,” she asked.

“Got it. Maybe I’ll bring my dog—he goes everywhere with me,” he told her.

“Your dog? Why in the hell—” She stopped herself before she finished. “Yeah, go ahead, bring the mutt,” she told him as she tried to picture this dog doing Katie. It was just what the doctor ordered.

“Are you sure it ain’t you?” he asked again.

“Yes, I’m sure it isn’t me,” she told him again. “Another thing that you might want to do is too keep her blindfolded. It adds a hint of mystery to the fantasy. Okay?” she asked.

“Okay, we can do that. Hell, I have a hard-on right now. Ya want ta see it? I’ll show it to ya if ya want ta see it,” he told her as he quickly stood up and pulled it from his pants.

“Oh, God, no! Put that thing away!” she yelled at him as she quickly turned away.

“So all we have to do is to go to this bitch, rip her clothes off, and have sex with her, is that right?” he asked.

“That’s it. And one hundred bucks is all yours. So is it a deal?” she asked.

“Hell yeah, it’s a deal! We’ll do this bitch up right. She’ll never forget the love session that we’ll be giving her,” he boasted.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. So tell me how to find you, and when it’s all set up, we’ll meet again and get this done,” she told him.

“Okay, we’ll get her done up good. We’ll bend her this way then that way. Stick our cocks—” Susie cut him off.

“Hey, I don’t want to hear the nasty details, okay? Just do as you were told and enjoy yourselves,” she told him.

She slipped out of the bar just as quietly as she had snuck in.

# Katie Sings Solo before God

Sunday morning brought with it a cool breeze blowing in from the ocean. Katie added the finishing touches to her hair, double-checked her beautiful white satin and lace dress in the mirror one last time, and then proceeded downstairs. There was something in the air, something refreshing, but she couldn't figure out what it was. The smell of fresh coffee flowed from the kitchen. Katie walked in to find her dad all dressed in his very best suit. He was all clean-shaven, and he turned to face her as the door to the kitchen closed behind her. Katie just stood there, shocked at what she saw.

"Well I'll be, just look at you, Daddy. All cleaned up and all. Where did you get that suit?" she asked.

"I bought it last week when I knew that you were going to sing in church today. You like it, I guess?" he asked.

"Daddy, you look simply fantastic. But you bought it last week? I didn't decide to sing until yesterday. How did you know I would sing today?" she asked.

"Because of who your mother was. She never missed a chance to shine. And in her footsteps I knew that you would follow. And I ain't missing that. Nothing short of a flood could keep me away from that," he told her.

"Oh, Daddy, you really think Mama would approve?" she asked him.

"Katie dear, I believe that your mother has been at your side every day since the good Lord called her away. And while neither of us can actually see her, I know in my heart that she's here with us right now. She's that little voice that you hear in your head when you're deciding what to do. And that, my dear daughter, is how I knew that you would be singing solo today in church," he told her.

"Do you really think that I can pull it off, Daddy? I'm really nervous. What if I mess up?" she asked.

“Katie dear, you have three strong reasons to do this. You have the good Lord above, you have your mother, and you have yourself. Believe in yourself, trust in God, and your mother will lead you through this. You’ll be fine. After all, you are my daughter, ain’t ya?” he asked.

“Oh, Daddy, you always know what to say. I love you so much,” she told him as she threw her arms around his neck.

“I love you too, Katie, but if anyone has a reason to worry, it would be Michael,” he told her.

“Why should Michael be worried?” she asked as she stepped back with a worried look on her face.

“Hell, Katie, just look at you. You’re so pretty. You’re going to have the full attention of every boy in town. Michael might not have to be worried, but he will all the same,” he told her. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, sir, just let me grab my wrap, and I’ll be ready. It feels like there’s a breeze outside,” she said.

The two of them walked out onto the porch to find Michael sitting outside with his car, waiting to take them to church. He was taken aback by the sight of Katie. “Excuse me, my lady, but your coach awaits you,” he said as he held the door open for her.

She just smiled and turned and looked at her dad. “You knew he was out here, didn’t ya?”

“Hey, why walk when we have such a handsome driver to drive us?” he asked.

“Good morning, my dear sir,” she said as she slid herself into the backseat of the car. Grady was ushered into the other side of the car.

“Where to, miss?” Mike asked

“Twice around the park and then to church, my dear sir, and don’t dillydally. My man is waiting on us,” she told him.

“As you wish, my lady,” he said as he put the car into gear and drove away.

They went twice around the park and on to church, just like the lady ordered. The parking lot of the church was a lot busier than Katie remembered from last week. And even though she hadn't driven to church last week, she remembered looking over at the parking lot and noticing that there weren't that many cars. But today, the lot was overflowing. And Katie didn't know why.

Father Mathews met them at the bottom of the walk. "Ms. Windslow, good morning to you! And who is this handsome-looking gentleman with you today?" he asked.

"Father, I'd like you to meet my daddy. We just call him Grady. Daddy, this is Father Mathews," she said as she introduced them.

Father Mathews held out his hand, and Grady shook it.

"Father, nice little church that you have here," he told him.

"Well, it's nice to have you here today. And because of your daughter here, our attendance today is almost doubled," he told them.

"Because of me? What did I do?" Katie asked.

"They're all here to hear you sing," Father Mathews explained.

"You're kidding, right? It wasn't even confirmed until yesterday," she told him.

"Well, Michael, told me that you were going to do it last Monday," the father explained.

"Oh, he did, did he?" she asked as she turned to look at Michael. "Well, out with it. Did you tell Father Mathews that I was going to sing today, or didn't ya?" she asked.

"Well, more or less, I guess. I just knew that you would," he told her.

"And you didn't bother to ask me about it first?" she asked.

"Are you mad?" he asked.

"No. Well, maybe a little. We will talk later," she told Michael as she turned back to Father Mathews. "Well, I hope that your congregation isn't disappointed."

"I'm sure that the Lord will provide," he told her.

As they all slowly walked toward the church, Mike looked at Grady. "Do you think she's really mad at me?" he asked.

"Naw, but I could be wrong, ya know," he told him.

"Thanks, Grady, that makes me feel so much better," he replied.

"Anytime you need my help, I'm here for ya," he told him.

Melissa and Rick were waiting for them at the door. "What took you people so long? Come on, we have reserved seats up front," Melissa told them.

"Ask your brother," Katie told her.

Melissa turned to look at her brother, and her gaze was asking him what he had done.

"Later, sis, later," he quietly told her.

Every head was turned, and every eye was fixed on Katie as she walked up the aisle. She could hear small talk from people she didn't even know, like "Is that her?" or "There she is." Inside her head, she was thinking to herself, *Michael, if I screw this up and I look like a fool, I'm going to kick your butt*. She sat down in the front row with Michael at her side. Her eyes were locked on the microphone that stood off to one side on the platform. *God, please don't fail me now*, she prayed to herself.

"Katie, please don't be mad," he told her, but she just held up her open hand as if to stop his words from reaching her ears.

Melissa kneeled down in front of her.

"Katie, are you okay?" she asked. "You're looking rather pale."

"Just really nervous," Katie told her.

"Don't be, you'll do just fine. Are you mad at my brother?" she asked.

Katie just smiled. And she leaned forward and whispered into her ear. "No, but don't tell him, okay? Let him sweat a little while, okay?"

Melissa smiled back at her. “Got it,” she told her before she took her seat again.

Father Mathews stood his place before the congregation. “I’d like to start off by welcoming all of you here this fine Sunday morning. I see a lot of faces out there among you. Some old familiar faces and a lot of new faces too. It’s a pleasure to see all of you here to give thanks to the Lord. I’d like to start this sermon off with a prayer. If you would all please bow your heads, I’ll get us started.” Everyone bowed their heads and listened to the payer as Father Mathews said it for all of those in attendance.

The rest of the sermon went as clockwork. Katie tried not to look at the microphone, but it was calling to her. Finally, it was her time to shine or to die a very miserable death.

“Last week, we had the honor of hearing a very special voice from within the ranks of our congregation. That voice belongs to a new member of our little church here. Now I’ve received several calls this week in regard to that voice. All of them wanting to know who it was and if she was going to be back here today. Well, I’m pleased to tell you that she is here, and by the grace of God, she has agreed to sing a solo for us today. So let’s welcome her up here with open arms. Ms. Katie Windslow.”

Katie slowly rose to her feet. Step by step, she made her way up to the microphone.

“Ms. Windslow, you look really nervous. Are you okay?” Father Mathews asked.

“I’m fine, just really nervous, is all,” she answered.

“Well, no need to be nervous. What would you like to sing for us today?” he asked.

“I was thinking about ‘Peace in the Valley’ if that was okay.”

“Excellent choice,” he told her as he looked over at the elderly lady sitting behind the organ. “Ms. Wilson, if you would please.” The organ sparked to life as the music started filling the room. At the point where Katie was supposed to start singing, nothing happened. She froze, totally speechless. *Katie, get yourself together. You can do this,* she told herself.

Then something magical happened. The voice of her mother filled her head. *Go ahead, Katie, sing, sing like you've never sung before. I'm right here to help you. Trust me. Sing, child, sing.*

When the organ brought the music around the second time, Katie sang. The words flowed from her lips as if voices of angels. She carried and hit the notes with precision. Her voice was crystal clear and sharp.

Everyone was shocked to hear such a voice. Everyone except for Grady, that is. He heard the voice of his wife singing up on that stage and just as he had told Katie earlier. He knew that her mother was up on that stage with her. And at that moment there in that little church, Grady's heart was full.

Now as Katie was singing, something happened that would be talked about for years to come. From behind Katie as she sung, there appeared a mystical glow. There wasn't any lights shining on her nor any sunlight that would contribute to the glow, but everyone saw it. Everyone, except for Katie, that is. Grady knew what it was, but everyone else had to guess. Grady knew that it was the spirit of her mother.

Father Mathews was taken in by what he witnessed that day. And in the following years, his little congregation would grow and prosper beyond his wildest dreams.

When she had finished singing, the glow slowly disappeared. Katie, unaware of what had just happened, started to retake her seat. Father Mathews stopped her.

"Are you all right, child?" he asked in a very concerned and caring voice.

"Yeah, in fact, I've never felt better, but why all of the concern? It was just a song," she told him.

Father Mathews told Katie about the glow that showed behind her as she sung. Katie turned and looked at the microphone and then back at Father Mathews. "Oh, that, it was my mother helping me sing, is all," she told him as she took her seat.

Father Mathews was shocked by Katie's explanation about the mystical glow. So he went to Grady to see if he could explain what they had all just

witnessed.

“Grady, you saw the light, didn’t you?” he asked him.

“Sure did, just like ya all did,” he replied.

“And what do you think it was?” he asked.

“Father, we lost Katie’s mom a few years back. And I have to agree with her. That was her mother’s spirit helping her child out in time of need. Katie believes that. I believe it because I heard my wife’s voice. The question that you all have to answer is what do you believe? You come to church to praise God. But when something like this happens, do you abandon your faith, or do you believe that much more in the Almighty and things that you can’t explain or understand? I think your question is unanswerable. The answer, my dear sir, is already in your heart,” Grady told him.

“Grady, I didn’t mean to imply that I didn’t believe your daughter’s answer, sir,” the father answered back.

“I never said you did. What I said you were questioning, sir, was your own faith in God. And you being a man of the cloth and all should be more open to the miracles of God,” Grady told him.

“My beliefs and my faith are not at question here,” the father answered back.

Grady turned to face the congregation. “How many of you saw and believe what you just witnessed?” he asked.

Nearly every hand rose, showing Grady that they had witnessed it and did in fact believe that they just witnessed a miracle of sorts. Then he turned back to the father. “I suggest that you put more faith in your congregation, sir, for they saw exactly the same as you and I saw, and yet they believe in miracles more than you do,” he told him. “This, sir, is why I haven’t been to church since the missus got called away.”

“I never said that I didn’t believe, sir,” Father Mathews told him.

“Then never question how the Lord works. My daughter needed help. Her mother helped her. It’s just that simple. Accept it for what it is, or get a

new job, sir,” Grady said as he sat back down.

“Well, I agree with you, sir. If I didn’t believe, then yes I would be required to seek employment elsewhere, but you all have to understand just one thing. In our little church of God, we have all witnessed something truly unique. And tonight when you lay your head down to go to sleep, each and every one of us will have to decide for themselves just what they saw here today. For me, the answer is clear. And I’m sure that the news of this will travel far and wide before we meet next Sunday. There will be people asking questions that nobody can answer. So we’ll close this sermon with a prayer that asks for guidance through the coming times. Will you all please bow your heads for prayer?”

# The Abduction of Katie

Susie wouldn't have to wait that long for her chance at grabbing Katie. Not long at all. It was Monday night when opportunity presented itself. There she was acting just as happy as could be. At twenty years of age, Katie didn't see anything wrong with her almost-adolescent schoolgirl skipping routine as she made her way toward Mike's house for a nice quiet dinner with his family. After all, even if Mike and her weren't married—at least not yet anyways—she was still being treated as a part of their family. And she kind of liked that idea, especially since that would bring her and Melissa that much closer. Not that they could really be any closer, but she would have her last name, and that just suited her just fine.

But she wasn't watching her back, not as Grady had warned her to. One minute she was skipping along, and then there was a sharp pain in the back of her head then darkness.

Susie towered over Katie's lifeless body as it laid there on the cold sidewalk. "Where's your mommie's spirit now, bitch?" she said as she stared down her. Glancing around to make sure that she hadn't been seen, she lifted Katie's ninety-pound body up on to her shoulder and carried her over to her father's car, tossing her into the backseat like a sack of potatoes. But just to play it safe, Susie tied Katie's arms behind her back. She also threw on a makeshift blindfold and a gag to keep her quiet.

The dirt roads that ran through out the hills surrounding Savannah were bumpy and rough. Something Susie had failed to take into consideration when she planned Katie's demise. But it was too late to change her plans now.

The car slid to a stop outside of the small hole in the hillside. Maybe at one time years ago, the hole was bigger. But one good landslide years ago had reduced it to a mere portion of what it once was. Carrying her body into the cave proved too easy. Once inside, the tunnel opened up into a large room. The lanterns that she had left there, when she had scoped out the site, still burned, giving off a ghostly glow. Susie had pounded four large

wooden stakes into the ground on her previous trip, and attached to each stake was a long piece of rope. Dropping Katie's still-lifeless form in the center of the stakes was easy too. She quickly untied her arms and rolled her onto her back. She pulled her right arm up toward the first wooden stake and tied it as tight as she could to the stake. Then she did the same with left arm. When she had finished, she grabbed both of her ankles and pulled her entire body down, just to make sure that the ropes that held Katie's arms were indeed tight. Then she pulled each leg out to meet the remaining ropes that would secure her legs to the wooden stakes. When she had finished her appointed tasks, she stood back admiring her handiwork. But something was missing. Something that would make a statement proclaiming Susie as the true victor of this fight. Suddenly, she knew what was missing. She pulled Katie's dress up, revealing her nearly perfect white satin panties, and then she ripped the top of her dress open, exposing her ample breasts cupped in a white satin bra that matched her cute, little panties.

Katie finally started to stir. Susie was completely quiet as she watched her little prisoner slowly discover just how much trouble she was really in. At first, Katie just moaned, then she pulled on each of her wrist then her legs. Her moans turned to screams as she thrashed about there all spread out between the stakes. The ropes held her tight. Susie was proud of her work. She didn't say anything. But her smile said it all.

Quietly she left her there to wonder about her upcoming appointment with fate. Susie drove away laughing.

Mike was pacing back and forth, glancing down at his watch then at the clock. *Where was she? She was supposed to be here at six. Now it was almost seven. This wasn't like her. Not at all.*

"Son, relax. Maybe she's just running late. The meatloaf can wait," his mother told him.

"You don't understand, Mother. She's never late," he told her.

"Michael, let's get in the car and go get her. But I think you're overacting a bit," Melissa told him.

"Maybe I am. I'm just worried, that's all," he told his sister.

“Fine then, we’ll go get her, and everything will be fine. You’ll see, okay?” she asked.

Melissa had to insist that she drove. Mike was getting really worked up over Katie being late. It wasn’t as if she was drastically overdue. In truth she was only an hour or so late. There were a million and one things that could have happened, but now she was thinking as Mike was—thinking the very worse things when in fact it would most likely be something silly or stupid.

Grady was outside on the porch as Melissa pulled through the circular driveway. And while Grady might have been surprised to see Mike fly from the car, even before it came to a stop, his face took on a whole new look when he realized that Katie wasn’t with them.

“Grady, is Katie here?” Mike asked.

“Well, no. In fact, she went to your house almost two hours ago,” he replied.

“Shit! She never showed up. I’ve worried sick—” Mike started to tell him, but Grady cut him off.

“Relax, son. Getting all worked up ain’t going to make things any better. Where have you looked so far?” he asked.

“Nowhere. We came straight here. But I didn’t see her on the road either,” he explained.

“Okay, you and your sister can start by backtracking the road back to your house. Make sure to check the sides of the road. If, and I do mean if, she’s hurt, she might not be able to signal you. I’m going to call the sheriff’s office and report her missing. Then I’ll drive around and meet you back at your place. Okay?” he told him.

“Okay, I’m really worried. This ain’t like her, not at all,” Mike explained.

“I know. I taught her better. So get going. I’ll be along shortly,” he told him.

“Okay. We’ll double-check the road. We’ll see you back at my place,” Mike told him as he climbed back into the car.

As the car drove away, Grady got a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. And he didn’t like it.

Susie sat across the table from four of the sickest, foulest guys that she had ever seen. Just the smell of their unwashed bodies and clothes made her stomach turn.

“Here’s your money and the release form that I promised ya,” she told the guy from the other night as she slid the envelope across the table. As he reached for it, she pulled it back.

“Are you sure you know what you’re supposed to do?” she asked.

“Hell yeah! We’re going to fuck this bitch every which way. Are you sure that she’ll be thar?” he asked.

“Oh yeah, trust me. She’ll be there all right. Just follow the map, and she’ll be there all right. And she has made one more request. No rubbers, she wants to feel you and everything that you give her. Okay?” she asked.

“What’s a rubber? You mean like a balloon?” he asked.

*Surely nobody could be this fucking stupid,* she thought to herself.

“Yeah, a fucking balloon for your dick, stupid,” she told him.

“Oh, one of those things. Don’t use them anyways,” he said.

That comment gave her an even worse feeling in her stomach. She gave him the envelope. Have fun, guys. But I would suggest that you give her about two hours or so, to work herself up for this. By then, she should be ready for ya.” she told them as she got up to leave.

“Sure, but it’s really you, ain’t it? You can tell us, come on. It’s you. I know it,” he insisted.

“Not even in your wildest dreams or my worse nightmare,” she told them as she left the bar.

Grady had shown up at Mike's. There was no trace of Katie anywhere. They waited impatiently as the sheriff took down Katie's description.

"And you say that this just isn't like your daughter to disappear like this?" the deputy asked.

"Never, not in a million years," Grady told him.

"Does Katie have any enemies or someone that might want to hurt her?" he asked.

Mike and Melissa both turned and looked at each other. "Susie," both of them said at the same time.

The two of them flew through the screen door before the officer had a chance to finish. This time, Mike drove. In record time, the car was sliding to a stop outside Susie's house.

"Wait a second. If Susie did do something to Katie, let's make her think that we already know. Maybe we can trick her into leading us there," Melissa told her brother.

"What?" he asked.

"Let's go in there and tell Susie that Katie is in the hospital. And right now, she's giving her statement to the sheriff. Let's scare her into believing that whatever it is that she did didn't work. If she didn't do anything, then nothing will happen. But if she did, then I'm willing to bet ya that either she'll run or go and double-check her work. See where I'm going with this?" she asked him.

"Yeah, and we can follow her. You know, I'm glad that you're going to college after all," he told her.

"Come on. Let's scare the hell out of her," she told him as she started walking up to the front door of the house.

Melissa knocked on the front door. Mr. Barnes answered it. "Well if isn't Melissa. Just look at how you've grown up. How's college life treating ya?" he asked.

“Just fine, Mr. Barnes. I was wondering if we could have a word with Susie. Is she home?” she asked.

“Why, yes, as a matter of fact, she just got home. She’s upstairs in her room. Here, I’ll call her—” Melissa cut him off.

“No, if you don’t mind, I’ll go up there. Mike, you can wait here. This is best handled as girl on girl. Okay?” she told him.

He just looked at her with total surprise. But he knew that his kid sister was right.

Melissa didn’t knock or anything. She just walked right in and slammed the door shut behind her. Susie wasn’t expecting to see anyone, especially Melissa.

“What are you doing here? Get out of here before I call the sheriff!” Susie yelled at her.

“The sheriff? You might want to reconsider that one. You see, my little twisted friend, the sheriff is at the hospital right this minute taking Katie’s statement,” she told her.

Susie’s eyes glanced over at the clock. *They couldn’t had finished already*, she thought to herself.

“A statement about what. I didn’t do anything,” she told her.

“I never said that you did. But they found her wandering down some dark deserted road with blood on her face. And well, I thought that you might want to know about it,” she told her. The bit about the blood might have been too much, but it sounded good at the time. “And when all of the details are out, I wonder who the sheriff will be talking to, then. I hate it to be you, Susie. You went too far this time,” Melissa told her as she turned and left the room, again slamming the bedroom door behind her. Then she opened it again and stuck her head back in the room. “Gee, I wonder if that’s what a jail cell door sounds like?” she said as she slammed the door again. Without stopping for as much as a thank-you, Melissa walked through the living room, grabbing Michael by the shirt sleeve and kept on walking. As they got in the car, Michael didn’t ask. Melissa didn’t say

anything until she had moved the car down the street and around the corner. From here, they could still see Susie's house.

"Oh, that little bitch knows something all right. She got mud, fresh mud, all over her shoes," she told him.

"So now we wait, right?" he asked.

"It won't be long. I know it," she told him.

Just then, someone opened the two rear doors of the car and climbed in, shutting the doors behind them. Both Mike and Melissa just about jumped out of their skins. In the rearview mirror, Melissa saw the familiar faces of Grady and the deputy.

"Damn, Grady, you just about made me shit my pants. Don't do that," Mike told him.

"Sorry, wasn't time for talking. I've told the deputy here what I thought you might be doing, and well, I guess that I was right, wasn't I?" he asked.

"Only if we were right," Melissa answered.

"Do you think Susie will take the bait, miss?" the deputy asked.

"Look for yourself." She pointed. Susie was backing the car out of the driveway. Melissa waited for Susie to drive past them before she slowly eased the car in behind her. Not too close but close enough.

"What about your lights? I can't see shit," Grady told her.

"I grew up in this town, and I know every bump in every street. Don't need the lights. Just as long as I can see her, I'm fine," she answered.

"I could write you a ticket, you know?" the deputy told her while half laughing.

"I would let you use my pen, but I'm rather busy at the moment," she fired back at him.

"Where in the hell is she going?" Mike asked.

"This takes you out behind Miller's Pond and around the base of the hills," the deputy told him.

Melissa brought the car to a stop about a hundred feet short of where Susie's car had stopped. They all watched as they saw her ducked into the cave.

"All right, you guys, all stay here. I'll go check it out," the deputy told them.

"Excuse me, Deputy, this is our party, and we're going. Don't even think about trying to stop us," Melissa told him.

"Well, I tried. 'Didn't think it would work, but I had to try,'" he said.

"You kids, go along. I'll bring up the rear," Grady told them. "I'm not too sure that I want to see what we'll find in there."

Without saying so, they all agreed.

Slowly, without as much as a twig crackling, they approached the entrance to the cave. The deputy had his gun out and ready. Just in case.

Then Mike motioned all of them to stop as four guys walked up to the entrance of the cave.

"Who in the hell are those guys, and where did they come from?" Melissa asked in a soft whisper.

"Hey, it's your party, remember?" Grady told her in an even softer whisper. Melissa threw him a dirty look over her shoulder.

They could hear voices coming from inside the cave. Mike couldn't wait any longer. He jumped up and ran toward the entrance to the cave.

"Michael, oh shit!" Melissa said as she too started running after Mike.

The deputy looked at Grady with a questionable look on his face.

"After you, you've got the gun, sonny," Grady barked.

Mike could see Katie stretched out on the dirt floor between what looked like some poles. Her twisting and squirming told him that she was alive. Then he saw one of the guys with his pants down around his ankles. He was starting to lower himself down between Katie's legs.

Without thinking twice, he ran into the cave and jumped toward the guy. Michael's boot caught him square in the man's mouth. A shower of blood and teeth erupted from the man's mouth as his body flew off of Katie and rolled off across the dirt floor. Another one of the guys tried to come to his friend's aid. That soon proved to be his first mistake. His second mistake came when he put the crotch of his pants in the path of Michael's foot.

Susie tried to sneak out of the cave amidst all of the confusion, but Melissa was there to meet her. "And where in the hell do you think you're going, bitch? You can't leave yet. The party is just getting started," she said as she spun around and planted her best punch to the center of Susie's face. She never made a sound, but instead, she fell to the ground. Blood poured from her nose, and nobody cared.

Michael just looked at the two other men as they huddled against the wall of the cave with their arms over their heads.

"Goddamn cowards!" he said as he reached down and pulled the blindfold and the makeshift gag from Katie's mouth. Melissa untied her ankles as Mike released her arms. He tried to cover her up the best that he could. She sunk into his arms and cried.

"Katie, sweetheart, are you okay? Did they do anything to you?" Mike asked. "We need to know."

"No, but they would have if you hadn't . . ." She sunk back into his arms again and cried some more.

Grady came over to his daughter's side. Mike told him to care of her. He had business to attend to.

The deputy had everyone stretched out on the floor and was in the process of searching them when Mike walked up and pulled one of the remaining guys to his feet. In a movement that must have seemed like a blur to the guy, Mike spun him around and pounded him into the wall of the cave.

Mike glanced over at the deputy, but he didn't say a thing.

Mike looked at the guy straight in the eye. “Whose idea was this?” he demanded.

And every one of the guys yelled out in unison, “HERS!” All of them, that is, except for the one Michael had performed dental work on—he was still quiet.

“But we wasn’t doing anything wrong,” the guy told him. Mike pounded him against the wall again.

“What did you say?” Mike asked.

“I said that we wasn’t doing anything wrong. We have a release form,” he told Mike.

“Excuse me, you have a what?” Mike asked him again.

“We ain’t stupid. We got us one of them there release forms. Just like she told us. She paid us one hundred dollars,” the man told him.

Without Michael knowing it, Katie was up and walking toward him. She walked right up to the man’s face.

“You have a what?” she demanded.

“A release form. She told us without it, it would be rape,” he told her.

Katie reached down and grabbed a handful of the guy’s manhood in her hand and squeezed as hard as she could. “Show me your release form, and I’ll show you mine,” she told him in a voice that confirmed that she meant what she said.

“It’s in my shirt pocket!” he cried out in pain. Katie released her grip and pulled the note from his pocket. Unfolding it, she read it by the light of the lanterns that was still burning.

When she read it, she was facing away from everyone. But now she turned to face them, and pure hatred filled her face. “That fucking bitch! Where is she? I’m going to kill her, I swear to God!” she screamed as she handed Michael the note and walked right up to Susie’s blood-covered face. The deputy had her standing up and in cuffs and was standing behind her. Katie walked right up to her face.

Michael quickly read the note. “Oh my god!” he said as he looked up to see Katie standing in front of Susie.

“You might hate me for loving Mike. You might hate me for being Rick’s friend, and you might even hate me for being Melissa’s friend, but I’ll bet ya that you’re going to hate me a whole lot more when I do this,” Katie said as her hand flew up, stopping just short of Susie’s face. Susie sunk down in an effort to protect her face.

“You coward! I should . . . I really should hit you. But I’m not going to. You ain’t worth it . . . none of this is worth it.” Katie started to walk away. She took about two steps when she suddenly spun around and threw a punch that shattered Susie’s jawbone into six pieces. The punch echoed throughout the cave as the bones cracked. She looked down at Susie on the floor. “Maybe none of this is worth it, but my mother is. And if you ever speak her name again, I’ll do more than break your goddamn jaw. Bitch!”

In the side of Susie’s face was a perfect impression of Mike’s grandmother’s ring. Out reaching from the ring’s impression were several broken blood vessels, and the black-and-blue bruise was growing at a very advanced rate. But Katie wasn’t concerned about Susie’s swelling and discolored face. “That’s for what you did to Rick. Aren’t paybacks hell?” she said as she turned and walked away.

Melissa and Mike were shocked well beyond belief. Here’s Katie, this ninety-pound sweet little thing, and there lay Susie—all one hundred and seventy pounds of her knocked out cold.

“Katie, are you okay?” her daddy asked.

“I am now,” she said as she turned and took one final look at Susie.

She walked up to Mike and threw herself into his waiting arms.

“Remind me never to get you mad at me, okay? Damn, that was sweet,” he told her.

“Yeah well, she deserved it. Anyways, is dinner still on?” she asked. “I’m hungry.”

“Relax, Katie, dinner will be there when we get there. But I’ll tell ya one thing. I don’t think Susie will be eating solid foods for a while,” Melissa told her.

“Well, as a person, she sucks anyways, might as well do it through a straw,” she said as she started laughing.

“Katie dear, I know that you’ve been through a lot, but it surprises me to hear you asking about food of all things. I mean really, you were assaulted, kidnapped, tied up, and almost raped, then you took out Susie with one single blow, and all you can think about is food? I reckon I must have missed something somewhere, but hell if I could tell ya where,” Grady told her.

“Daddy, if I stand around here and mope about what might have happened or what should have happened, then Susie won. But if I pick up my life right where I was, as soon as I can, then I win, you see. And regardless of nothing else, I flat ass refuse to let that fat-ass bitch win anything.”

“Yep, that’s your mother talking, sure as I’m standing here. Speakin’ of which, what did that note say that got you all pissy in the first place?” he asked.

“Daddy, there’s certain things that a girl will never tell her daddy. Out of the love and the respect that I have for you. But showing you or telling you what it said would only hurt you. And that I will not do. All you have to know is that it was about Mom and leave it at that. Okay?” she explained to him.

“Something tells me that you’ll never tell me,” he told her.

“Not even if the coon dogs brought home coons that were already skinned and cooked,” she replied.

“Excuse me, but we have a slight problem,” the deputy told them.

“Really, and what would that be?” Mike asked.

“I have all of these people that need to go to jail. But my squad car is over at your house. Remember?” he told them.

“So put them in Susie’s car, or do you have to have a star on the door?” Melissa asked with a smile.

“Why don’t you just let them go?” Katie suggested.

Everyone turned and looked at her in total amazement.

“Excuse me, sweetheart, but did you say let them go?” Mike asked her.

“Sure why not? They really didn’t do anything, right? And the last time I checked, being stupid wasn’t against the law, right, Officer?” Katie asked.

“Well no, being stupid isn’t against the law, but, miss, they were going to . . . well . . . violate you,” he told her.

“Look, Officer, I’m not pressing charges on these guys, so let them go,” she told him.

“Katie, do you know what you’re doing?” Mike asked.

“If they went to jail, then what? Nothing. Because they didn’t do anything. Okay, that one ripped off my underwear, but Mike took out most of his teeth. And if they did go to jail, then they would become another victim of Susie. And that’s not right. So let them go. Please,” she insisted.

“Well okay, miss. I mean, if you’re sure about this, I guess I’ll have to let them go,” he told her.

“You’re really going to let us go? I mean even after what we was going to do to ya?” asked one of the men.

“Would you like me to change my mind?” she asked.

“Oh no, don’t do that. We’re really sorry, miss,” he told her.

“Officer, just how long do I have if I should say . . . decide to change my mind?” she asked.

“Well, let’s see. Yes, I do believe it’s a year. Why do you ask?” he asked.

Katie looked at the four guys before her. “Okay, gents, here’s the deal. I will not file charges against you for a period of one year if—” she said and stopped and waited.

“If what?” one of the guys asked.

“If for the next year, you take a bath each and every day, you wash your clothes at least once a week, and you promise me right here that you’ll never hurt another woman. Is it a deal?” she asked.

“We wash ourselves, wash our clothes, and be nice to the girls, and you won’t throw us in jail? Right?” he asked.

“That’s it. So what’s it going to be? A bath or jail?” she asked.

“Well, miss, we’ll take the bath part. Delroy does smell pretty bad,” answered one guy.

“Fuck you, Billy Ray! You stink worse than I do!”

“Guys! Stop it. *All* of you smell like shit, okay? So is it a deal or what?” Katie asked one more time.

“Okay, it’s a deal,” he told her.

“And, Deputy, if you happen to see any of these fine gentlemen, and it appears that they have broken this agreement, please feel free to arrest them on the spot, and I’ll sign the paperwork,” she told him.

“That I can do, and I will too. So you heard the lady. Git! Scram, run before she changes her mind,” he told them as the four guys ran out of the cave and disappeared into the night.

“Why, Ms. Katie Windslow, you are an angel, aren’t ya?” Melissa asked.

“That was a fine thing that you just did, miss,” the deputy told her.

Katie looked at Mike and her daddy. “Well, what about you two. Ain’t you going to say anything?” she asked.

“Not me. You did what you thought was right. That’s all that needs to be said,” Grady told her.

“And what about you, my knight in shining armor, what do you have to say?” she asked.

“I love you, Katie Windslow,” he replied.

“And that, my dear sir, is exactly what I wanted you to say. Now let’s go eat.”

“Fine, the deputy can take Susie’s car and take her ass to jail, and we’ll take our car back to our house. Grady, are you hungry?” Melissa asked. “You’re welcome to join us if you like.”

“Well, I wasn’t hungry a while back, but now I can eat a cow, I reckon,” he answered back.

“Sorry, no cows today, just some of our mom’s great meatloaf,” she replied.

“That will do nicely,” he said as he started walking toward the exit when he noticed something just under the surface of the dirt. He bent over and picked it up. As he looked at the object, years of wondering were answered.

“What ya find there, Grady?” Mike asked.

“Oh, just a rock,” he answered as he quietly slid it into his pocket.

“Well, come on, ya all. I’m famished!” Katie yelled.

Once outside, the deputy approached Katie. “Miss, I will need you to come down to the station house and make a statement. Anytime tomorrow will be fine,” he told her.

“Tomorrow will be fine, Deputy. I’ll see you then,” she said as she looked past the deputy to a very beaten and sore Susie Barnes in the backseat of her own car. Their eyes met, and without a single word spoken by either of them, the message was clear. The war between them was over or at least for now.

# Trouble Believing

Following the incident in the cave, Katie and Melissa were closer than ever before, if that was possible. Katie had earned so much respect from Melissa for emerging from that cave with so much more than just her dignity intact. A lot lesser of a person would have folded and collapsed given everything that Katie had endured, but Katie never did, not even a little.

And the word had gotten around town about Katie breaking Susie's jaw though they would never know why. Some things are best not told or repeated. But Susie had very few friends, and their numbers were declining at an alarming rate.

But over the following days, Michael's ears were hurting. When he talked to Katie, it was Melissa this, Melissa that. And when he talked to Melissa, it was Katie this and Katie that.

Mike and Grady finally said the hell with it and would go outside and sit on the porch every time those two got together, which was most of the time.

As they sat out on the porch one night, the two of them started talking.

"You know, after having read all of that material, there's still one thing that I don't understand," Mike told Grady.

"And what would that be?" Grady asked.

"Maybe it's nothing, but consider you're the one doing all of this back then. You have eight wagons, which means there's at least eight people who knew about what was happening. Why hasn't the treasure ever surfaced before now? And if they did have eight wagons leaving Savannah in the middle of the night, wouldn't someone see them?" he asked.

"I've thought about that. But remember, people were fighting to get out of town, especially when they knew Sherman was coming. So even if they were seen, nobody knew or even suspected anything. But as far as the eight

drivers are concerned, I don't have the slightest clue. Just another part of the mystery, I reckon," Grady answered.

"Well, suppose they did have eight wagons and eight drivers. The chances of riding in those wagons with the advancement of Sherman's troops just doesn't make sense. That would be suicide. Someone should have seen them. And you sure as hell couldn't drive a wagon that far in just one night. Let alone eight wagons in a row. So it would have to be a very well-planned and executed plan. But I just can't see all of this happening," Mike told him.

"I agree, but when you consider everything that had to happen to make all of this happen, it's totally unbelievable. But it appears that it did in fact happen just like they claim," Grady answered.

"But I would feel better and even a little more convinced if we could find anything to prove it's really here," Mike told him.

"What do you mean?" Grady asked.

"Well, it's not that I don't believe everything, but all we really have is a couple pieces of paper that supposedly tells of this fantastic plan of robbing the Confederacy of all of their gold, transporting it a couple hundred miles, without being detected by the Union Army or the Confederacy, and then stashing it at some cotton plantation deep in the South. It just doesn't play out in my head. It's totally inconceivable that it actually happened the way that they claim it did in the letters. You see what I mean?" Mike asked.

"I see what you mean. Very clever observation, Michael. But we do have a few things in our favor," Grady told him.

"Like what?" he asked.

"Well, someone took the gold or whatever it was, and it's never been found," he told him.

"Oh, that helps out a lot. What I was talking about was more like a piece of the treasure, hell even a gosh darn broken wagon wheel. Something that proves that we're not on a stupid wild-goose chase," said Mike.

“I see, but I’m total convinced that what we have here is real, and it is buried here somewhere. And as far as proof is concerned, I do have something to show you,” Grady told him as he dug the object from his pocket and handed it to Michael.

Grady saw Michael’s eyes light up as he studied the object.

“Is this what I think it is?” he asked.

“Sure is. That’s a Confederate double-eagle gold coin,” he told him.

“Where did you get this?” he asked in a very excited voice.

“I found it in that cave the other night. I know. I lied to you when I said that it was just a rock, but there were other people there,” he told him.

“So maybe there’s more of them? Maybe you stumbled on the treasure itself. We need to go back there for a better look. Did you show this to Katie?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t. I reckon with everything that was going on, it might be better not to, just for the time being anyways,” Grady answered.

“So, when do we go back and look around?” Mike asked.

“Well, I was thinking, how did Susie know that cave was there? I mean it was pretty well hidden from view, but yet she went right to it,” he told him.

“I don’t know. That’s certainly a question worth asking,” Mike replied.

“Well, here’s a little bit of information for ya. I went to the library yesterday to see what information I could dig up on those caves. What I found was very interesting indeed. The caves, it seems, have been around for years even before the Civil War. But there has never been any map or any official record of them until about ten years ago when someone decided to document and count these caves and map out their exact locations,” Grady explained.

“Ten years ago? So why after all of this time did someone suddenly decide to keep or create a record of them?” he asked.

“That’s exactly what I thought, right up until the time that I spotted the name of the person that filed the results,” Grady told him.

“Who was it?” Mike asked.

“My brother, Jack,” Grady explained.

“Your brother? But why?” he asked.

“Well, I’m not sure exactly, but I would have to assume that he somehow connected the dots, and they led him here to Savannah and to the caves,” he told Mike.

“Well, maybe, but if that’s true, then we’re on the right track. That’s great news!” Mike proclaimed.

“Maybe, but Jack’s record had only been checked out once since they were filed. And that was about a week following the filing. And you’ll never guess who checked them out,” Grady told him.

“You’re kidding! You don’t mean Barnes, do ya?” Mike asked.

“Damn, good guess. Shortly after Jack filed his paperwork with the county clerk, Barnes checked them out. And I have to assume that Barnes found out what Jack was doing and what he was looking for and either tried to stop him or steal it altogether,” Grady explained.

“But didn’t you say that you haven’t heard from your brother for at least ten years or so?” he asked.

“That’s the last time anyone in our family had any contact from him. But we now know that he was in fact here ten years ago. And apparently, he was close or getting too close I reckon. But that also indicates that someone else knows about the treasure, most likely Barnes. It would be really stupid on our part to assume that back when this all went down, Barnes didn’t leave some type of map or even a letter for one of his family members to find that would lead them to the treasure too. Remember, his death was totally unexpected when the wall of the bank fell on him. I would have left behind some type of message for someone else in the family to find if I met an untimely death, so we have to assume that he did to?” Grady told him.

“Wait a second, if your brother hasn’t been heard from and the last know person to cross paths with Jack was Barnes . . . my god . . . do you think maybe . . . well—” Grady cut him off.

“Are ya askin’ do I think Jack is dead? And Barnes is connected to it? The answer would be yeah, I do. Everything would suggest just that. I hope that I’m wrong. But there’s this uneasy feeling deep down in my stomach that says otherwise,” Grady explained.

“God, I really hope that you’re wrong,” Mike told him.

“So do I, but I fear differently,” Grady said sadly.

“Well, if you’re right, we can always sic Katie on him,” Mike said with a half grin showing on his face.

“I know that you’re kidding, but if Barnes did kill Jack, I’d rather keep Katie clear of him especially since what she did to his daughter. Revenge on the part of Barnes just might, well, you know,” Grady said with an uneasy tone to his voice.

“Of course, but it would be cool to see Katie in action again. Did you see her? Just one hit and Susie went down,” Mike said.

“Yeah, she caught all of us by surprise, didn’t she?” Grady asked.

“Yeah, especially Susie. She never knew what hit her,” Mike told him.

“But there’s something else to consider. When we do find the treasure, we’ll have to inform Uncle Sam of our discovery. You do realize that, don’t you?” Grady asked him.

“Uncle Sam? Why would we tell them?” he asked.

“Michael, remember this isn’t just about finding the treasure for our own personal gain. We want to fix the injustice done to Katie’s grandfather. And in order to do that, Uncle Sam will have to be told. And besides, if Barnes did kill once, he’s capable of doing it again. The treasure might be too damn big to guard and move safely,” Grady explained.

“Of course, you’re right. I wasn’t thinking I guess,” Mike told him.

“And back to what you said about having eight wagons and eight drivers, I think I’ve come up with a solution to that question,” Grady told him.

“Well, do tell. I’d like to hear it,” Mike said as he slid his chair a little closer to Grady’s.

“If it were me doing this, would it not be smart to send all eight wagons on a different route with different departure times? Just by doing that, wouldn’t your chances of success be greatly improved?” Grady explained.

“God, I never thought of that. But you’re right. By sending each wagon out on a different route and at different times, that would be the smart move for sure,” Mike answered.

“Well, keep in mind that it’s just a theory, but it would definitely improve their chances I reckon.”

“So what do we do now?” Michael asked.

“I think it’s time that we revisit a certain cave. That cave was huge, and with that one tunnel running off to the right, that would be the very best place to start, I reckon,” Grady said with much anticipation to his voice.

“I agree, sir. We’ll grab some really good flashlights and maybe some extra batteries, and we’ll go check out Katie’s cave,” Mike told him.

“We might want to bring a pickax and maybe a shovel or two. We might have to dig a bit. If it’s there, it’s surely not out in the open just waiting for us to stumble on it,” Grady added.

# Exploring Katie's Cave

Mike and Grady sat the table as Katie and Melissa studied the gold coin. The level of excitement was high. They explained to them about Jack and the map and the fear that Grady had about the extreme possibility that Jack was most likely dead.

But when they told Katie that they intended to go back into the cave, the look of uncertainty came over her face.

“Are you okay with that?” Grady asked.

“Yeah . . . I think I’ll be all right. I’ve made it through this far, but . . . I’ve also shut that part of my memory off. But going back in there just might bring it all back to the surface again. But I think I can deal with it,” she told them.

“Well, before you go in, I’ll go ahead of you and pull up the stakes if they’re still there. That should help, shouldn’t it?” Mike asked.

“Yeah, that would be a great help. But I’ll just have to focus on the task at hand . . . and not dread on what happened in the past,” she told him.

“Ms. Katie Windslow, you’re constitution must be made of cast iron. I think you’re one of the bravest ladies that I’ve ever met,” Melissa told her.

“Well, thanks . . . but even cast iron cracks when it gets stressed,” she replied.

“Maybe so, but considering everything that you’ve been through, you just keep on pushing on,” Melissa answered back.

“And that, my dear Melissa, is her mother showing herself—again,” Grady added.

So the four of them carried some shovels and pickaxes out to the trunk of Mike’s car. Each of them carried a six-volt flashlight, and spare batteries were to be left in the trunk, just in case they needed them. As they drove back out to the cave, Grady had a very good suggestion.

“After we unload the tools, it might be a good idea to hide the car. We don’t need our location known, especially if what we think what Barnes might have done is correct. If he did in fact kill Jack, he would most certainly kill again,” Grady warned them.

So after all of the tools were out of the trunk, Mike drove the car down the road a bit and pulled it behind some large bushes. Someone could actually walk right by it and not see it. And as he said he would, Mike entered the cave first, removing any trace of what had happened there previously.

The cave was a lot darker than any of them remember before and certainly a lot bigger as well. The ceiling was very high, nearly twenty feet at different spots. The walls were a good ten to eighteen feet across. But the tunnel that ran off to the right was more than large enough to allow even the largest wagons of that time to traverse its path. The tunnel itself was totally without light from the outside. And you couldn’t see your hand even if it was up to and not touching your face. The four of them slowly walked the darkened corridor silently without as much as a peep. The tunnel itself held an almost ghostly feeling in the air that never moved. The tunnel went on and on into the darkness. Then the tunnel split into two separate tunnels. They decided to check out the left fork first, but disappointment soon came as the tunnel ended just ten or so feet from where it had started. So they went back to the other tunnel and continued their search. Then after about a hundred feet or so, they came to a dead end. Solid rock lay before them.

“Damn. A dead end. Well, I guess we were wrong about this idea,” Mike proclaimed with a hint of disappointment to his voice.

“Michael, you’re seeing what they want you to see,” Grady told him.

“I see rock. What is it that I’m supposed to see?” he asked.

Grady looked at the girls. “Ladies, what do you see?” he asked.

“Well, I’m not sure but that does it all look like, well, out of place,” Katie asked.

“Oh, I see what you’re getting at,” Melissa said with a smile that nobody could see in the dark.

“Follow me, guys, ladies,” Grady told them as he headed back to the other fork of the tunnel. Standing at the end of the tunnel, Grady held his flashlight up onto the wall.

“Okay, look at this wall. What do you see?” he asked.

All of them agreed that it was solid rock. Just one huge piece of rock. You could see the grains of materials that flowed through the rock. Then he took them back to the other tunnel.

“Now look at this wall, and tell me what you see,” he told them.

As they studied the wall, they noticed there were no veins of materials like the other wall had. In fact, this wall was a mixture of different ores and minerals. Then they saw what Grady had seen. This wall was in fact man made by stacking rocks on top of each other and then throwing loose dirt and gravel against the wall to fill in the gaps that was left between the rocks. All at once, they started to smile.

“Okay, I’m not sure what’s behind this wall, but whatever it is, before we leave, we’ll have to restack this wall, okay? We can’t let anyone know that we’ve been here. Okay?” Grady asked.

Again they all agreed. The anticipation of whatever lay on the other side was so high that they might have agreed to rebuild the entire mountain if they had just been asked.

“Okay, let’s move only those rocks that we need to, and since the rocks on this side are bigger, let’s start here,” Grady said as he pointed at the left side of the wall.

One by one they all helped to move rock after rock. After about ten or so rocks had been removed, there was an opening up in the top left corner.

“Katie, you’re the smallest, so we’ll lift you up so you can see what’s on the other side, okay?” Mike asked her.

“Oh yeah, lift me up. This is so cool,” she said as she lifted up her foot to meet Michael’s hands. One fast hoist and she was up, peering through the hole with her flashlight.

“Well, what do you see?” Melissa asked.

“Hang on. It’s really dark in there. Wait a second . . . Oh my god! I see a wagon—no, two wagons and some boxes! Daddy, I think we’ve found it. The treasure is here!” she told him in an overly eager tone.

“Good job, Katie! Get down now so we can move some more rocks,” he told her.

She jumped down and grabbed Melissa by the shoulders. “We’ve found it, Mel! We’ve really found it!” Katie half screamed at her.

Melissa just stood there speechless as Katie continued to shake her back and forth. Then Katie realized what she was doing and stopped.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I got carried away,” Katie told Melissa.

“That’s all right. If anyone has a reason to celebrate, it would be you,” Melissa told her.

“Well, why don’t you two get carried away over here and carry away some of these rocks?” Grady snapped.

“Sorry, Grady,” Melissa told him as she and Katie went back to helping with the rocks. Soon, they had an opening large enough for them to climb through, one at a time of course. One by one, they entered the silent area, which felt more like a tomb. They just stood there looking at the back of the first wagon. American history was about to be rewritten, and a sense of achievement soon overtook all of them. As Katie walked alongside the first wagon, her light shone on something that scared the holy shit out of her. She screamed and turned into Michael’s chest.

“What in the hell is that?” she asked half crying.

“That, my dear, would be a horse, or what’s left of it anyways,” he told her.

There appeared to be two of them before each wagon.

“They left those poor animals hooked to their wagons and sealed them in here to die. What kind of people are we dealing with?” Melissa asked.

Grady stared at the skeletons of the horses and at their riggings.

“Look, you can see where these poor animals tried to chew through their harness as they fought to escape. These poor animals died a very slow and painful death. What a waste,” he said in disgust.

Everyone just stood there in complete silence as they paid tribute to all of the poor animals and the way that they had died. Melissa and Katie had tears in their eyes.

Grady said the best prayer that he could muster considering the circumstances, for he truly believed that all animals deserved their spot on God’s green earth right along with all of mankind and, therefore, deserved the same right to life. No animal, large or small, should ever have to endure the pain and agony that these poor animals did. When he had finished, all of them had tears in their eyes. But they tried to move past it.

“Hey, guys, look at these,” Katie said as she held out her hand holding four more double-eagle coins.

“Where did you find those?” Melissa asked.

“Right here on the floor of the second wagon,” she said as she pointed to the spot. Then Mike found a couple, then Melissa. Grady only found three of the valuable coins. In total, they found seventeen coins.

“So where’s the treasure?” Katie asked.

“Yeah, I thought the treasure was here,” Melissa added.

“Just calm down, you two. What we have discovered here is concrete proof that the treasure is here. Well, maybe not here in this very spot but somewhere close by. And for those of you who can’t count, there’s only six wagons here, and not the eight that we thought,” Grady explained.

“So where’s the other two wagons?” Katie asked.

“Well, Mike and I kind of figured that if we did find all eight wagons, it would have been a miracle. I reckon that not all of the wagons made it through. What happened to the other two? Well, that’s anyone’s guess, I reckon. Did the Union capture it or did the South? Who knows? And I have to assume that we’ll never know for sure. But we have six out of the original eight. That’s pretty good odds if you ask me,” Grady told them.

“Yeah, remember what the note said—the treasure was hidden at Matterson House, and this cave isn’t Matterson House. So we’re on the right track, just not where the *X* marks the spot. So I can only suggest that we keep looking,” Mike added.

“I agree with Mike. But you can keep the coins that you found. And remember, you can’t tell or show them to anyone. Not until we find the rest of them,” Grady added.

“So where do we go from here?” Melissa asked.

“Well, first, we get out of here and put that wall back up, then I would have to say back to Matterson House. I really believe that the answer is in those papers. We just missed it, is all,” Grady told them.

The wall soon proved easier to tear down than it was to rebuild. But they got it done. As they exited the cave, Mike went over to a large tree and broke off a good size branch and went back into the cave.

“What is he doing?” Katie asked.

“I reckon he’s erasing our footprints so nobody will know that someone had been there. You have a pretty smart guy there, Katie,” Grady told his daughter.

“Yeah, I know. I’m a pretty lucky gal,” she said with a huge smile on her face.

# Squares Turned to Diamonds

Back at Matterson House, they spread out all of the documents on the table. They studied them but still came up empty.

“What are we missing here? The answer has got to be here. It has to be here,” Melissa said.

“Yeah, but where?” Katie answered.

“We’re this close but yet so far. Damn!” Mike said in a very frustrated voice.

Grady was busy studying the riddle.

*Squares turned to diamonds  
From the roof’s peak.  
Be careful of your steps  
If it’s the treasure that you seek.*

But it just didn’t make much sense.

Meanwhile, Mike was studying the etchings of Matterson House. There was something about the pictures, something that told him to look at them closer. And so he was doing just that. Then it jumped out at him.

“Grady, how many white pillars are on your front porch?” he asked.

“Six. Three on each side. Why do you ask?” he asked.

“Well I’ll be!” Mike proclaimed.

Suddenly, everyone was peering over his shoulder.

“What did you find Mike?” Grady asked.

“These etchings. Are you sure these are of this house?” he asked.

“I reckon I never double-checked. Aren’t they all marked Matterson House?” he asked.

“Yeah, but these only show four pillars, and not six. So this may not be this house,” he explained.

“What?” Grady asked. But as he looked at the etchings, he had to agree with Mike. It wasn’t this house. “So where is this house if it isn’t here?” he asked.

“But look at this. This etching shows mountains behind the house, but there are no mountains behind this house. But if this isn’t your house, why is it labeled Matterson House? And your house, if I remember right, has eight windows across the upper story, and this one only shows four. And the chimneys are wrong. You have four or five, but this shows just one. What’s going on here?” Mike asked.

“Well, I know for a fact, this is Matterson House because I read a book on Southern plantations for school,” Melissa told them.

“Well, is it possible that there might have been two houses by the same name in Savannah?” Katie asked.

“Okay, let’s assume that these etchings are labeled wrong, then why would they be in here with all of these Civil War era documents? Why would he save these etchings if this isn’t supposed to be this house?” Grady added.

“Well, surprise, everyone, another hurdle to jump over,” Mike added.

“Wait a second. Katie, I think you hit the nail on the head,” Melissa said.

“How’s that?” she asked.

“I remember reading something about the original Matterson House being built, but they couldn’t finish it. Something about a well—either they couldn’t dig it or something like that. So they rebuilt it in a different location and made it even bigger. So if I remember right, could those etchings be of the original Matterson House?” she asked.

“Really? Wow, so if the treasure was hidden at Matterson House, could it be at the old location?” Grady asked.

“Don’t quote me, Grady. I could be wrong and totally offtrack. But it would be easy to research to find out the facts,” Melissa added.

“Well, if you’re right, it would explain everything, especially these etchings,” Mike answered.

“You wouldn’t know where the original location was, would ya?” Katie asked.

“No, I haven’t a clue. But like I said, it would be easy to research to figure it out. Give me about an hour tomorrow, and we’ll know for sure,” she told them.

“Ya all want to know what bothers me the most with all of this?” Katie asked.

“Sure, honey, what bothers you the most?” Grady asked.

“Even with all of the stealing and deceit that had to happen to pull off this perfect robbery almost a hundred years ago, in my mind, I can just picture those poor defenseless horses and how they suffered and died. That goes beyond sick. That’s just cruel and mean. Whoever did it should feel damn lucky that they’re already dead ’cause, without thinking twice, I would have shot the sick, evil bastards just on general principles,” she told all of them.

“Speaking for myself, and maybe everyone else, I would have to say that I would load the damn gun for ya, I reckon,” Grady answered.

“Well, I don’t know about the rest of ya, but this treasure-hunting business is making me thirsty. Katie, my love, how would you like to join me for a malted?” Mike asked.

“Gee, let me think about it for a while. Okay, I’ve thought about it. It sounds like a super swell idea. I’d love to,” she replied.

“And what about you, sis, would you like to join us?” he asked.

“I’d love to, but I promised Rick that I would stop by. And that was yesterday, so I think I’ll swing by and give him some sad-puppy eyes and

beg for forgiveness,” she replied.

“You’re smitten on him, ain’t ya?” he asked her.

“Well, sort of—no, wait a second, you know what? I guess that I am at that. But I could do a lot worse than Rick,” she replied.

“I think so. Rick is a hell of a nice guy. He’s always been nice to me, quiet and polite, charming and pretty handsome too I might add,” Katie added.

“Katie, if you weren’t with my brother, I would almost swear that you were smitten on Rick too,” Melissa replied.

“Well maybe if I wasn’t with Mike, then maybe I would be?” she answered back.

“Okay, time for us to be going. The conversation around here is going places that I don’t need to go to. Grady, you’re welcome to join us if you like,” Mike asked him.

“Me in a malt shop? Ain’t going to happen. That is a place for the younger folk, like you guys, I reckon,” Grady responded.

“You’re only as old as you feel,” Melissa told him.

“Now, you’re scaring me, missy. Restacking those rocks today did me in for sure, I reckon. And nobody wants to feel this damn old,” Grady told her.

“Anyways, Katie and I are going to the malt shop, and we’ll see you two later,” Mike said as he pulled Katie softly along behind him.

“Slow down. We’re not in a race you know. Besides, I like just strolling along with your arms around me. It’s kind of romantic, don’t you think?” Katie asked him.

“Doing anything with you, my dear, is romantic,” he answered.

“Hey, I was thinking, remember a while back when you told me that one of these days you would just take me and make me your own? Well, I was wondering when that might, uuhh, well, happen?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe someday. And why do you ask such a question?” he asked.

“Because of you. Because you were the one to come to my rescue to save me from a fate worse than death itself. And I’m a woman, and you’re a man, and well, you know,” she said softly.

“I know what? What in the world are you ramblin’ about?” he asked.

“What do I have to do here? Do I have to hit you over the head with a stick?” she asked.

“And why would you do that?” he asked.

Mike knew what Katie was hinting at, but he wanted to toy with her awhile.

She stopped him and spun him around to face her. With a huge smile and clinched teeth, she told him, “Just take me, take me now! Damn it!”

“Take you? Oh, I see, and where would that be?” he asked.

“I don’t care. Take me right here, right now. Just do it!” she demanded.

“Katie my dear, it is virtually impossible to take a person somewhere when in fact they’re already here. So how can I take you right here if, in fact, you’re already here? Now I could take you over there.”

“Just stop it. Okay, I get the message. Here I am throwing myself at your feet, willing to give all of me to you, and you’re not even interested,” she said as she walked away with her arms crossed across her chest.

“Katie, oh, come on, I was just kiddin’ ya. Of course, I want you more than you’ll ever know, but I’m not going to degrade you by doing it right here on a concrete sidewalk, in the middle of downtown Savannah, Georgia. Okay?” he told her.

She stopped and spun around. She smiled. “You really want me. Really? Then why haven’t you touched me. All you do is hug and kiss me, but you’ve never even felt me . . . like normal boys do . . . or should.”

“Question? Do you want me to treat you the way that certain boys treat certain girls, or would you rather be pampered and loved for who you are,

and not what a normal guy gets from normal girls?” he asked.

“How about a little of both? Oh hell, Mike, I don’t know. I’ve never even talked this way to a guy before. But something inside of me tells me that you’re the right one. So what’s a girl supposed to do?” she asked.

“Katie sweetheart, there is no doubt in my mind that you’re the right one for me too, but it doesn’t mean that any time is the right time. And to be totally honest here, I’ve never slept with a girl before. So when I decide that it’s time, it will be with you, and it will be great. But jumping into this just doesn’t make sense. And as far as the touching goes, I’d love to run my hands all over every inch of your body. To feel your soft tender skin beneath my fingers . . . and run my fingers through your long soft blonde hair, but that my dear would drive me nuts. So much in fact . . . I would probably go all the way. And ruin everything. So do you understand?” he asked as he looked at her.

She was standing there, lost in a trance. He softly nudged her, and she kind of jumped a bit. “Oh, I’m sorry. I was picturing you running your big ole manly hands all over my soft tender body and your fingers through my hair, and I guess that I got carried away. But it was good—no, it was great,” she said in a very soft sexy voice.

“Katie, did you understand what I just said?” he asked.

“Yeah, but when it’s time, how would you know or when will we know, I guess?” she asked.

“I’m not sure, but this isn’t it, especially with the sidewalk routine. But I’m really certain that when it’s time, we’ll both know, okay?” he told her.

“Okay, I trust you. But I haven’t told you thank you for rescuing me in the cave. When I first came to and I couldn’t move, and I realized that I was more or less spread open for the entire world to see . . . I was . . . well, I was hoping that it was you that did that to me. But then, I smelled Susie’s perfume, and I knew that I was in trouble. But with that same breath of air, I had to believe that you would save me. And you did. So thank you, my knight in shining armor,” she said as she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him as she had never kissed a guy before. He returned the favor.

When they pulled their lips apart, they just looked at each other.

“I do have a confession to make to you,” he told her.

“Oh really? I’ve got to hear this. I mean considering the subject of our conversation, and now you have a confession to make. This should be hot. So please continue, sir,” she said as she quietly waited for his confession.

“Well, when I rushed in to save you . . . and your dress was pulled up over your stomach . . . and the top of your dress was open as well . . . exposin’, well, your white bra and your . . .”

“Tits, Michael, they’re called tits,” she told him.

“Okay, your tits. It was an instant turn-on. My first thought was wow! But then I had to save you. But for that first couple of seconds . . . I did wish that I was the one that thought that up. You were simply beautiful. All exposed like you were . . . yet unable to res—”

He pulled her into him, and she accepted him. The passion of the moment had caught up to them. Their hands roaming, searching every bit of new territory. And had it not been for the spotlight of the police car shining on them, they might have . . . well . . .

“Hey, you two, can’t you find a better place to make out besides here?” the deputy yelled.

“Okay, Deputy, we will,” he answered. Mike and Katie ran down the sidewalk holding each other’s hand and laughing as they left the very jealous deputy behind.

“Where in the hell did he come from?” she asked.

“Don’t know. All I know is five more minutes, and we would have been really busted. I could see me explaining that to your daddy,” he told her.

“Daddy knows that I’m a woman. Come on, the malt shop is just around the corner. I’m thirsty,” she told him.

As they slid into their seats, sitting next to each other, they were still laughing.

“Did you see the look on his face? What a card,” Katie said.

“Yeah, his eyes were as big as silver dollars,” Mike replied.

They ordered two chocolate malts and lowered their voices down considerably.

“So you would like to see me all tied up like that, would ya?” she asked.

“That’s not what I said. What I said was that I wished that I had thought of it first. But I do have to admit that you were very sexy in that position,” he told her.

“So you thought that I was sexy all spread out for every Tom, Dick, and Harry to see?” she asked.

“Forget Tom, Dick, and Harry. I would want you like that for my eyes only,” he replied.

“Well, maybe if you’re a really good boy, Mommy will reward you,” she said in very serious tone. Then both of them started laughing.

“So what do you think of what all we’ve uncovered so far. Isn’t it exciting?” Katie asked.

“Very exciting indeed. But at the same time, I get the feeling that we’re being watched,” he confided in her.

“You too? It’s like there’s a pair of eyes on me all the time. You know, like when you’re at the park or somewhere, and all of a sudden you get that feeling that someone is watching you. You look around, but there’s nobody there. It freaks me out,” she answered.

“Well, when you get home, you be sure to tell your daddy what you and I felt ’cause maybe he felt it too. Two of us feeling it is weird enough, but if Grady and Melissa also felt it, then it’s most likely for real. And we’ll have to watch each other’s back,” he told her.

“Yes, I agree with you on that most certainly. Better safe than sorry for sure,” she told him as she gripped his leg under the table, causing him to jump a little.

“Oh, are you ticklish?” she asked.

“No, you just startled me, is all. Why? Are you ticklish?” he asked.

“Yes, I am very ticklish indeed. And please don’t tickle me. I’ll pee my pants,” she told him.

“Oh, then I’m safe. I can tickle you to my heart’s content,” he said.

“No, like I said, I’ll pee my pants,” she told him again.

“But, Katie dear, you’re not wearing pants. You’re in a dress. So that means that I can tickle you,” he said.

“Okay, smartass, I’ll pee my underwear. There! Are you happy now?” she asked him.

“I will be as soon as you wet your undies. That would be funny,” he said with a grin.

“Yeah right, up until the time that I kick your butt,” she warned him.

“Well, if you’re going to get violent, then forget it. I saw firsthand what you did to Susie,” he told her.

“You know, for the life of me, I really don’t remember hitting her. I remember reading the note, and the next thing that I remember, she was down on the ground,” she confessed to him.

“Well, you don’t remember it because it happened like that. And you could hear the bones break throughout the cave. Sure surprised me. Never knew you could hit like that,” he told her.

“Well, I never intended to hit her, but on top of everything else, then the note, I guess I just snapped,” she told him.

“Remind me to never get you that mad at me, okay?”

“Well, never say anything about my mom, and you’re safe,” she told him.

“I guess that I’m safe then. I would never say anything about your mom. Especially since I’ve never met her. But out of respect for you, that just wouldn’t be fair. That’s low, mighty low,” he told her.

“Let’s get out of here while it’s still early enough to do something else,” she told him.

“Sure, what would you like to do?” he asked her.

She just stood there with those big beautiful blue eyes and smiled the most devilish grin she could.

“Oh, that was a stupid question. Okay, besides that. Something that requires us to be dressed would be good,” he told her.

Again she gave him that same look as she slowly started to pull up the hem of her dress.

“Gosh darn it, Katie, is that all you think about?” Then he realized to whom he was talking to. “Okay, bad question. I know, let’s go see a movie. How’s that?” he asked.

“Yeah, we could sit all by ourselves over in the darkest part of the theater, and you could hold my—as I suck on your—” she told him.

“Katie, enough already,” he told her.

“What? You could hold my popcorn as I suck on your soda pop. What’s wrong with—Michael, you dirty-minded little boy, I should spank your backside for having such thoughts,” she told him as her eyebrows danced along and a huge sexy smile came to her face.

He studied her up and down. Yes, she would feel great in his arms, wouldn’t she? Her hands roaming, his hands searching through the darkness, the kissing, the smell of her filling his nostrils, driving him mad . . . “Oh hell, the movies sounds good to me too, but we better hurry,” he said as he darn near dragged her across the street.

# The Lord's Prayer

Mike and Katie hadn't expected to stay out so late, but they had. Acting like some adolescent schoolkids, they had done what most red-blooded American kids would have done if given the chance. Everything, the kissing, the touching, the exploring, everything except for that one final act that would have made everything else—well, you get the picture.

Katie didn't sleep well the night before. But she figured that it was the aftershock of the other day with Susie in the cave. She had cried herself to sleep, but it wasn't a deep peaceful sleep. There was something about last night that hadn't been right, but she couldn't recall what it was. It wasn't the time with Mike. No, sir, that had been just fine in her eyes. But something had happened later after she had gotten home, but for the life of her, she just couldn't remember what it was. So she sat there at the dining room table trying to drink a cup of black coffee left over from the night before. It was so thick that she didn't have to worry about spilling it. But all that the coffee did was keep her wide-awake. But she still felt like shit.

Then there came a knock on the door. Grady and Katie got there at the same time. Together, they stood in the open doorway staring at Deputy Baker.

"Good morning to you, miss, Grady. I need to escort you to the courthouse, miss. Ms. Barnes has a court date today, and we need to get your signature on the paperwork before she goes into court," the deputy explained.

"Oh yeah, what time is court?" she asked.

"She's due in court at ten, miss, but I was told to bring you back personally," he told her.

"Really? And who told you this, may I ask?" she said in a real sarcastic voice.

"The sheriff himself, miss. So if you would please come with me, I would appreciate it very much," he told her in a very firm voice.

Katie just stood there staring at him.

“Deputy, would you please be so kind as to give me and my daughter a few minutes alone. I promise that she’ll be out shortly,” Grady asked.

“That would be fine, Grady,” the deputy was saying as Grady shut the door.

“Katie, what’s wrong?” he asked.

“Daddy, I’m torn between what I know that I should do and what I feel I shouldn’t do,” she replied.

“Does this have anything to do with you crying last night?” he asked.

At first she threw him a puzzled look, then she calmly said yes.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

Then suddenly, she had a huge grin on her face. “No, Daddy, I just realized that there’s no real choice in the matter. I’ll be fine. Got to go. The deputy is waiting,” she said as she opened the door. “I’ll explain when I get home,” she told her father as she closed the front door after her.

Grady watched as she climbed inside the patrol car and sped off down the driveway. Once at the courthouse she asked the deputy, “Can I see Susie before she goes to court?”

“I guess, but why would you want to do that, may I ask?”

Katie just stood there, for she didn’t know how to tell him what she was planning. “No reason. I just want to talk, is all,” she explained.

“Okay. Follow me, I guess,” he sneered.

The deputy led her down a few hallways and into the holding area, where they held those waiting to go to court on whatever offense they had been accused of.

Susie saw Katie before she saw her. Susie backed up to the back of her cage,

“Could you open the door please? I don’t think she’ll try anything with you right around the corner,” she asked. The deputy opened the door, and

Katie walked in to the tiny cell. For the first time, Katie got to see Susie's face.

"Oh gee, did I do all of that?" she asked.

Susie just threw her a dirty look.

"Does it hurt much?" Katie asked.

Again, Susie answered with the same dirty look.

"We're not going to get anywhere if you don't talk to me. So why do you hate me so much?" she asked her.

"Michael," Susie told her. And for the first time, Katie realized that her jaw had been wired shut.

"Oh, God, they've wired your jaw shut, haven't they? Susie, I'm so sorry this had to happen, but I'd like to try and help you, if you'll let me," Katie told her.

Susie threw her a really weird face. "Why would you want to help me?" she asked.

"Because of something Mike said the other day. He said that you really needed a friend on your side. And I'd like to be that friend, if you'll let me," she explained.

"Do you have any idea as to what those guys were going to do to you, do you? And you want to be my friend after all of that?" she asked.

"Funny I don't see them in jail, do you? This isn't a joke, Susie. I can help you. But this fighting has got to stop right here, right now," Katie explained.

"After everything that I've done, you still want to be my friend? What about all of the stuff that I've already done? What happens to all of that?" she asked.

"It's all forgotten, well, except for what you said about my mom. I'll never forgive you for that, but if you promise never to do it again, I promise never to bring it up again, ever. Okay?" Katie asked.

“I don’t get you. Not at all, Katie Windslow, but if you’re for real, then I guess I’ll play ball. What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Plead guilty,” Katie told her.

“Are you nuts? They’ll lock me up and throw away the key!” Susie screamed.

“Not when I refuse to file charges, they won’t,” Katie said with a smile.

“You’re not going to file charges on me? For real?” she asked.

“Look, when you get into court, just follow my lead, okay? If you don’t like the way that it’s going, then you can change your plea. Deal?” Katie asked.

“What else?” Susie asked, knowing that there was more to come.

“Nothing. We just act like the friends that we were before Mike came into the picture. Okay?” she asked.

“And what about Mike? Where does he stand on all of this?” she asked.

“He doesn’t know that I’m here, but we’re still boyfriend and girlfriend. Can you handle that?” Katie asked.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to. Are you sure that you want to help me like this? I don’t deserve any help from anyone, especially you,” she told her as she started to cry.

“If I didn’t, would I be here now?” she asked.

“I guess not,” Susie replied.

“Okay, it’s a deal. I’ll see you in court. Keep your fingers crossed okay? And I’m really sorry about your face, really,” Katie told her as she signaled for the deputy to let her out.

Katie sat in the front row, right behind the defendant’s table. Court was already under way. She prayed to God in hopes that this would work.

When the bailiff called Susie’s case, she was led into the courtroom where she took her spot at the table. The judge was looking through the file.

“Would the people like to explain to me why the complaints haven’t been signed?” the judge asked

“Your Honor, the complainant is here in the courtroom, but she wishes to address the court, Your Honor,” said the prosecutor.

“Oh, very well, let’s make this quick. Where are they?” the judge asked.

Katie stood up. “Your Honor, if I may?” she asked.

“State your name for the record please,” ordered the judge.

“Your Honor, my name is Katie Windslow,” she said.

“Katie Windslow, aren’t you the girl from the church?” he asked.

“Yes, Your Honor, that would be me,” she told him.

“I was there. I’m honored to have you in my court, Ms. Windslow. What can I do for you?” he asked her.

“Thank you, Your Honor. But I have a problem that only you and I can handle,” she told him.

“And what would that problem be, miss?” he asked.

“I have decided not to file charges against Ms. Barnes, Your Honor,” she told him as she waited for what was sure to come. And it did.

“Excuse me. You want to drop the charges. Let’s see, kidnapping, assault, battery, false imprisonment, and the list goes on. And suddenly, you have a change of heart?” he asked.

“Yes, Your Honor. I have, sir,” she replied.

“And for what reason do you give for such a request as this?” he asked.

“Just three words, Your Honor. The Lord’s Prayer,” Katie told him.

“The Lord’s Prayer? And without putting your beliefs on trial here, how does this all fit into my courtroom?” he asked her.

“Your Honor, before I lost my mother a few years back, she was not only my best friend but my mentor as well. One of the things that she drove into me was the belief in God the Almighty and the power of prayer. And so

for almost nineteen years, ever since I learned to talk, I've said the Lord's Prayer every night before I went to sleep. That is, every night until last night.

"Last night, I cried myself to sleep, Your Honor, because of one line in that prayer.

"'Forgive me of my trespasses as I forgive those that trespass against me.'

"Everything that I am, or ever will be, revolves around my belief in who I am as a person and my faith in the Lord, Your Honor. And it's my belief in God that tells me that doing this is the right thing to do.

"I've already talked to Ms. Barnes, Your Honor, and we have patched the holes that were torn in our friendship. There's too much hurt and pain in this world as I'm sure you know, sitting there on your bench and all. I'm sure that you see a lot more of this than I ever will. But throwing Ms. Barnes into jail isn't the answer, not this time. What she needs are friends and family. And of course, some counseling won't hurt, but that I leave up to you and your power as judge in this court of law," she told him without missing a beat.

The judge just looked at her in total bewilderment. "Ms. Windslow, had you been just some guy off of the street, I would have called that the biggest pile of hogwash that I had ever heard. However, since it's you, I'm convinced that you were both honest and sincere in your argument. But you do bring up a good point," he said as he turned to face Susie. "Ms. Barnes, I had every intention of locking you away for at least twenty years, but now in lieu of Ms. Windslow's retraction of most of the charges against you, I can no longer do that, and believe me, I want to. I believe that you are a very sick person. And like Ms. Windslow so kindly put it, counseling is going to be a requirement of your sentence. Do you understand, Ms. Barnes? If you miss just one session, or if I ever see you back in my court for as much as a parking ticket, I'll come down on you with the full weight of law. Do I make myself clear, Ms. Barnes?" he asked.

"Yes, Your Honor," she told him.

“Ms. Barnes, I might also add this. You’re a mighty lucky lady to have a friend that is both sincere and trusting as Ms. Windslow. It would not be very wise to let either of us down. So on the last remaining charges, how do you plea?” he asked her.

“Guilty, Your Honor,” she answered.

“Well, as much as I would like to send you away for a very long time”—the judge looked at Katie then at Susie—“I’m ordering you to attend one year of counseling and three years probation—supervised, I might add—and jail time to be . . .”

Katie and Susie both waited for the longest time.

“Ms. Windslow, I wonder if you would still be as forgiving had what’s laid out in this report had actually happened?” The judge asked her.

“Your Honor, I would like to believe that my faith would and could withstand everything that life could possibly throw at it, even death. So to answer your question, Your Honor, I would have to say, yes, it would still be the same,” she told him

“Oh hell, Ms. Windslow, you’re lucky that I’m in a good mood, and that goes for you too, Ms. Barnes. Jail time is five years in the state prison for women, which is hereby suspended, so I therefore, order the immediate release of the prisoner. However, Ms. Barnes, if I ever see you back here in my court, I will give you those five years without thinking twice about it. Plus whatever else the law will allow me to dish out to you. Do I make myself clear, miss?” he asked.

“Yes, Your Honor, very clear,” Susie told the judge in a very firm voice.

“Very well, case dismissed. Next case please,” the judge barked to the bailiff.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Katie said as she turned to leave the courtroom. Susie was released, and the two of them walked outside together.

“Katie, I was wrong about you . . . and your mother too. I’m sorry . . . really sorry,” Susie said as a tear came to her eye.

“Now, now, just relax. You still have to obey the order of the court and all. What you wanted those guys to do to me was pretty sick, you have to admit. But that’s all behind us now.

“I don’t know how you can ever patch things up with Rick. That’s between you and him to work out. But the lord works in mysterious way, so it wouldn’t surprise me if both of you came out of this smelling like roses,” Katie told her.

“Well, I’ll try, but I’ve hurt a lot of people, and it will take a lot of time to mend those sores, but after seeing you in action, I believe that everything is possible,” Susie responded.

“Go home, Susie. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. So make it a good one. Okay?” Katie told her.

Susie gave Katie a hug. “Thank you for the second chance. I won’t disappoint you,” she told her.

“I know that you won’t. Now go home,” Katie told her with a smile.

# Reading the Signs

Grady had just finished adding the finishing touches to the beautiful railings of the front porch. They had really needed a fresh coat of white paint, and now it was done. And it looked pretty darn good too. But knowing how Katie was and how she sometimes didn't pay that close of attention to her surroundings, Grady had playfully placed Wet Paint signs at various locations along the huge porch.

So now, he kicked back in his favorite rocking chair on the front porch, a glass of ice tea at his side, and his favorite pipe in his mouth. Normally, he didn't smoke, but at certain times, he would light up the old pipe just to relax. And this was one of those times. Yes, sir, that relaxing aroma of some good ole Georgia tobacco was just what the doctor ordered.

That was until the black sedan pulled to a stop in his driveway.

"Gee, can't a guy just relax with a good pipe of tobacco without some damn fool showing up and messing up a perfect rest time?" Grady said out loud just before he saw Father Mathews get out of the car. The father adjusted his freshly pressed suit and quickly ran his fingers through his thinning hair. As he walked around the front of the car, he saw Grady sitting there, puffing on a pipe.

"Good day to you, Mr. Windslow, how are we doing today?" he asked as he approached the front porch.

"It's Grady," he answered.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Father Mathews asked.

"You called me Mr. Windslow. But the name is Grady. Nothing fancy, just Grady," he answered.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr.—I mean—Grady. Is your daughter, Katie, in?" he asked.

"Nope, went somewhere with the sheriff. Don't know when she'll be back either," Grady told him.

“I get the impression that you don’t like me. Am I right?” he asked.

“Never said that I didn’t like ya now, did I?” Grady replied.

“Well, no, but I get this feeling that you don’t care much for me,” Father Mathews said.

“Is that what you came over here for? To see if I like you or not?” Grady asked.

“No, not exactly. I wanted to know if Katie would be in church on Sunday,” he told him.

“And why do you want to know that?” Grady asked.

“Well, because of what happened last week, there’s some important people coming—” Grady stopped him dead in his tracks.

“Oh, hold your horses there, Father. You say important? Important to who?” Grady asked.

“Well, to the church of course,” he replied.

“And let me guess, either you want her to sing again or they want to pick her brain with a few thousand questions about what happened last week. Or maybe both, am I right?” Grady asked.

“Well, yes, but it’s important,” the father responded.

“Important to you, not to Katie,” he answered back.

“Well, it’s important to everyone,” the father explained.

“Really? Well, tell me, Father, how is it important to Katie or myself if that’s easier?” Grady asked.

“I’m getting that feeling again, the one that says that you don’t like me,” the father explained.

“I’ll tell you what I don’t like, Father. I don’t like a man that wears the collar but doesn’t believe in what he’s preaching about. And I don’t like a man that wants my daughter to go to his church just so he can fill up his collection plate,” Grady told him.

“Sir, I assure you that is not why I want her there. And as for my beliefs, I do believe in God,” he replied.

“I never said that you didn’t believe in God, Father. What I said was you don’t believe in miracles,” Grady answered back.

“Sir, I resent the fact that you don’t think I believe in miracles ’cause I do,” the father answered.

“Father, the two biggest miracles in the world happens every day. And they are the fresh new cries of a newborn baby and the risin’ of the sun each and every day. And yet I don’t question either one of those. In fact, I embrace them.

“You happen to see a true once-in-a-lifetime miracle happen a few feet away from you, and you question it?

“You should have rejoiced in it. You should have been jumping around announcing it as a miracle of God. But you didn’t, sir. Instead, you asked questions. That sure sounds like a nonbeliever if you ask me, I reckon. Yes, sir, a man of little faith,” Grady shot back at him.

“Maybe you’re right. I should have acted differently. I just wasn’t expecting it, I guess,” the father answered.

“You didn’t expect it? Father, in this great big beautiful world, do you really think God only acts when people are expecting it? There’s miracles around us each and every day. Expect the unexpected. Stop and read the signs for God’s sake. Everything around you is an act of God.

“Especially around here. Look at the trees, the oceans, even the birds. There are signs of God everywhere you look, but you have to see the signs before you can read them, and then you’ll understand them,” Grady proclaimed proudly.

“I get your point, sir, and I agree that I should have jumped for joy last Sunday. And now I’m sorry that I didn’t,” The father said sadly.

“Father, two guys see a bird. One says it’s a blue bird. The other says it’s a black bird. So which guy is right?” Grady asked him.

“Well, that depends on what color the bird was,” the father replied.

“No, but then a third guy says it’s cardinal. Now who is right?” Grady asked the father again.

“I don’t get it?” the father responded.

“Father, they’re all right. If they truly believe that the bird is a certain color, who are we to say that they are wrong? The same goes with religion. One man says God’s name is Jesus. The next one says his name is Buddha. Who cares? They’re both right in believing what they believe. Miracles happen each and every day. Believe in them. Rejoice in them, but never—and I do mean never—question them. It will make you look the fool. Collar or not,” Grady told him.

“You know what? I think you just wrote Sunday’s sermon. May I quote you?” he asked.

“I would prefer that your congregation thinks that you wrote it,” he told him.

“By God, you’re right again,” the father smiled.

“Do you remember what I said about seeing the signs?” Grady asked him.

“Yes, sir, I do. Why?” the father asked.

Grady pointed to one of the Wet Paint signs. The look on the father’s face went from a smile to a frown as he looked over his shoulder to see a large white stripe running from his leg up to his shoulder.

“You have to read the signs before you can understand them, Father,” Grady told the father. They just looked at each other and started to smile.

“A point well taken,” he said as they started laughing.

# The Discovery of a Lifetime

Katie was waiting for Mike as he walked up the steps of the front porch. The screen door flew open, and Katie was hanging around his neck before he knew what was happening.

“Wow, what in the hell has gotten into you?” he asked.

“Nothing, just glad to see ya, that’s all,” she replied back.

“Well, you’re acting almost as frisky as you did last night,” he told her.

“That was fun, wasn’t it?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah! I felt like a little boy in a new toy store,” he replied.

“So did you see any new toys that you might want to try, say, maybe later?” she asked.

“Sorry, dear, but that list is endless. But I will promise to try each and every one as soon as I can gain enough energy. Last night just wore me out,” he told her.

“Really? Hhhmmm! I guess that I’ll have to keep a record so we’ll know what toys are worth repeating, twice or three or maybe more,” she said.

“Sorry again, same list!” he said with a smile.

“Great. I’ll keep that in mind. Yeah, honey, can we be serious for a minute? I really need to talk to you,” she asked.

He stopped and turned to face her.

“Sure, honey. What’s wrong? Are you okay?” he asked out of concern.

“No, really, I’m fine. Let’s go for a walk. I want to tell you what I did today, okay?” she asked.

“Okay, you’re sure that you’re okay?” he asked again.

As they started to walk slowly down the drive, Katie started to fill him in on the day’s events.

“Yes, I’m fine. In fact, I don’t think that I’ve felt this good in a long time. But I did something today that I really need to tell ya. I went to court today,” she told him.

“Court? Oh, to sign the papers, right?” he said with a tone of reassurance to his voice.

“Well, not exactly!” she told him.

“Just what do you mean not exactly? You didn’t sign the papers?” he asked.

“No . . . I didn’t,” she told him.

“Well, if you didn’t sign the papers, then what did you go to court for?” he asked.

“I kind of dropped the charges against her,” she said as she waited for the explosion that was sure to come.

“You did what?” he asked.

“You heard me. I dropped the charges against her,” she told him again.

He looked down at her, right into her beautiful big blue eyes.

“And what made you decide to do that, may I ask?” he said as he waited for her response.

“Well, you said that she needed a friend, and—” Mike cut her off.

“Yeah, I did. But you’re the one that said she was like a snake. Remember a rattlesnake with real sharp teeth, remember?” he asked her.

“Well, it turns out that she’s more like a worm,” she answered.

“Okay, let me explain something to you so you can get a visual picture going in your head. When I look at you, I see a sweet, innocent girl who is filled with gusto, charm, dignity, and class. Everything about you just drives me crazy. But Susie wanted to drive a wedge between us, dear. If those guys would have fulfilled their task, everything about you would be gone forever. No more smiles, no more laughter, no more touching you. And Susie would have divided us, sweetheart. And that wedge, I’m sorry to say, was

supposed to go right between your legs. Did you think of that before you did this?" he asked.

"Yes, I did. A lot, and I'm convinced that I did the right thing," she told him.

"So we're supposed to just sweep everything under the table and pretend it never happened, right?" he asked.

"I never said that you had to do anything. You can forgive her if you want to, but I did what I thought was right. And I am not going to stand here and get yelled at for doing what I thought was right," she told him in a very loud and harsh voice.

"Okay, calm down. I didn't mean to yell at you. Okay? But If you really did what you thought was right, well, then I guess I'll just have to accept it. Okay? I just hope this doesn't blow up in your face, is all," he said.

She turned to face him. "So you're not mad at me then?" she asked.

"No, I could never be really mad at you for anything, but here's the deal. If we are to be a couple, most likely a married couple someday, would it not be wise to consult each other on things that could affect us both? You say that you did this because you thought that it was the right thing to do. Okay, I'll buy that. I might not agree with it, but what is done is done, and we're stuck with it. But for now on, let's talk things over before either one of us does anything that we might regret. Okay?" he explained to her.

"That, my dear sir, is a deal that we both can handle. I guess I should have told you before I did it, but something this morning just told me to do it, and I did. Still love me, don't ya?" she asked.

He hugged her and gave her a great big kiss.

"Of course, I still love—" his voice stopped dead in its tracks as his eyes caught something that he had never seen before. "Well, I'll be a son of a bitch!" he muttered as his eyes became fixed on what he saw.

"Mike? What's wrong?" she asked as she turned to look at what he was staring at. "What are you looking at that has you all messed up?"

He looked down at her and took his two hands and turned her head upward toward the attic window of the house.

“Well, do you see it?” he asked.

“All I see is a window. Are you out of your mind? A window is just another window,” she proclaimed to him.

“Not when the window has a diamond in the center of it, it isn’t,” he told her softly into her ear.

At that, her vision became fixed on the upper left-hand attic window. And there, it was a diamond. Her head turned to the other windows of the house. Yet, this was the only one with a diamond in it.

“Do you think that’s the diamond in the riddle? The key to where the treasure is buried?” she asked.

“Go get your dad. We’ll let him decide. But, yes, I think it is. Hurry,” he told her, but she was already gone.

A few minutes later, Katie was half dragging a half-dressed Grady outside.

“What’s all of this ruckus about a dang burn diamond in the window. Woke me up from a nap to show me a darn window. Damn kids won’t let an old man sleep. Okay now that you’ve dragged me outside, what in the hell are you talking about?” he asked in a very unpleasant tone.

Katie and Mike pointed the diamond out to Grady. His attitude took on a whole new demeanor. “Well I’ll be damned. Well, what in the hell are we doing out here? Let’s go have a look-see,” he told them as he started running toward the house.

As Katie and Mike ran after him, Mike yelled, “I didn’t know your dad could run!”

“Neither did I,” she said as they flew through the front door and up the stairs to the third floor. When they got to the door that lead to the attic, Grady stopped.

“Hang on there. Got to catch my breath. I ain’t no spring chicken no more, I reckon,” he said in between his loss of breath.

Mike and Katie were both bent over with their hands on their knees. Their chests were heaving in and out.

“If he ain’t a spring chicken, then what does that make us?” Katie asked.

“I’d rather not know to tell ya the truth of the matter,” he answered.

Grady slowly opened the door that lead to the attic. Several boxes blocked their way to the window. But those were soon moved, and now they stood there, looking out the window.

“Okay now, let’s see. The riddle says squares turned to diamonds. How do you turn a square into a diamond?” Grady asked.

“Isn’t a square a diamond that’s been turned sideways?” Katie answered.

“Right, but how do we turn a whole window. And shouldn’t we be turning a square to be a diamond?” he asked.

“Wait a minute, look at this house. Every window has squares. But this is the only window that has a diamond in it. So what if you turned your head to look through the diamond?” Mike said as he tried to turn his head. He soon realized that that wasn’t going to work, not at all. Then he had an idea. “Katie, can you find me a metal coat hanger please?” he asked.

“Okay, I think?” she said as she left the attic.

“Just what are you thinking? Might I ask?” Grady asked.

“Hang on one second, and I’ll show you.”

Katie soon returned and handed him the hanger. Mike went about bending the hanger to match the exact shape of the diamond-shaped piece of glass.

“If you can’t bend the whole window, we’ll just turn the diamond,” he told them as he turned the wire diamond into the shape of a square.

“Great, now what?” Katie asked with a hint of disappointment to her voice.

“Wait a second. Let me see that,” Grady told Mike, and he gave it to him. Grady took the wire square and placed it against the smooth pane of glass that surrounded the diamond. As he slowly slid it across the glass, he soon realized that objects or landmarks in the adjacent hills surrounding Matterson House soon fell in to the diamond. But when the diamond lined up with the grassy knoll that was up on the hill behind the town, it lined up almost perfectly.

“Well I’ll be! Look at this!” Grady told them.

Mike and Katie both stared in amazement.

“Mike, isn’t that the grassy area where we were. Remember I asked you why nothing grew there? The place with all of the—”

“Gopher holes,” Mike and Katie said at the same time.

Mike took the wire off of the window and peered through the diamond pane itself. He had to turn his head to line it up, but it fit perfectly.

“Bingo! X marks the spot,” he said with a smile.

“You mean we were lying—I mean, sitting on top of the treasure, and it was right beneath us? That’s too weird,” she said.

“Well, it wasn’t only us. People have been using that spot for necking for years,” Mike stopped and looked at Grady. “Not that we were . . . Katie and I . . . weren’t necking . . . sir,” he told him as he realized his mistake.

“So you did finally get around to kissing her, did ya? Took ya long enough. Hell, in my day, well, I guess we’ll just be leaving that for another day, shall we?” he said. They all laughed.

Down below in the driveway, Melissa brought her car to a stop. She had the door opened before the car was completely stopped.

Grady opened the window and yelled down to her.

“Hey, Melissa!” he yelled.

She looked around without looking up.

“Up here, in the attic!” he yelled. This time, she looked up.

“Hey, I’ve got some news for ya! Stay there! I’m coming up!” she yelled back to him.

In the time it took her to climb the stairs, they had all decided not to tell her anything. Not yet anyways.

When she reached the door of the attic, she was winded too. “Grady, you really need an elevator,” she told him.

“Yeah, we found that out the same way that you did. So what did you find out at the library?” he asked her.

“Okay, I was right. This isn’t the original Matterson House. The original house was much smaller. The original house was completely built, but they couldn’t dig the well because it was solid rock. So either they were going to have to carry water to the house on a daily basis, or they could move the house to a better location. And they did just that. Now you’re never going to believe where the original house was located,” she told them.

Grady just smiled. “Come over to the window,” he told her.

She threw all of them a dirty look.

“Go ahead, sis. Go to the window,” Mike told her.

“Yeah, come on. Just listen to us,” Katie told her.

“All of you are up to something I can tell,” she said as she slowly approached the window.

“Now, just turn your head this way and look only through the diamond and tell me what you see,” Grady told her as he stepped out of the way.

She did as she was asked to do. She took a first look, then a second look. Then she turned a glance toward Grady.

“This is fantastic, but how did you figure it out?” she asked.

“Your brother did it,” Grady answered.

“My brother? He figured it out?” she asked, throwing Michael a very surprised look. “You did this?” she asked.

“Well, yeah, but it was more like all of us together,” he told her.

“Well, I have some more information regarding that property. Would you like to guess who owns that very valuable piece of real estate?” she asked them.

“Please don’t say Barnes,” Mike told her.

“No, but speaking of Barnes, Katie, you and I need to talk. But the owner of that little piece of grass is none other than you, Grady,” she told him.

“Me? I never bought that piece of land,” he told her.

“Oh, but you did. In fact, you actually own a lot more than you might think. Because when you purchased it, I understand that you did through an agent or by mail?” she asked.

“I contacted the bank by mail. I told them that I was interested in buying the Matterson homestead,” he told her.

“Exactly. And that’s what’s listed in the county records. However, since you bought the homestead, and not just the house, you actually get the entire homestead which is listed as one thousand acres, three houses including this one, two ponds, two creeks, and that little piece of grass overlooking the city. But would you like to know why you weren’t informed of this little bit of information?” she asked.

“Okay, I’ll ask,” Katie said.

“Because under an agreement with the bank, the Barnes get free use of their home until it was sold. And their home is part of the Matterson homestead. Ain’t that icing on the cake?” she told them.

“Well, we need to tell you something about Susie,” Mike told her.

“I already know. I was there,” she answered.

“You were there? But I didn’t—”

“See me. Nope, I guess you didn’t. I was down the hall in public records when I saw you go into the courtroom,” Melissa told her. “So I snuck in just to watch. I got a whole lot more than I bargained for.”

“Then you know why I did what I did?” Katie asked.

“Katie, a lot of people just say what they believe. But they never have the backbone to back it up. You did, and I support you in that. Your convictions are set in stone, my dear. And you refuse to budge from them even a little. I had more respect for you today in court than I have ever had in myself, let alone someone else. And if my brother doesn’t marry you before you slip away, I’m going to physically kick his butt,” she told her as she threw her brother a dirty, demanding look.

“Thank you, Melissa, that means more to me than you’ll ever know,” she told her as she threw her arms around her neck, and the two of them hugged each other.

“Okay, I just realized that I’m only half dressed here, and I’m catching a slight chill, so you two can hug away. Mike, could I interest you in a beer?” he asked.

“Did you say a beer? What happened to the ice tea?” he asked.

“Hey, I just found out I own a bunch of land. Forget the ice tea for now. Right now, I want a beer,” Grady replied.

“Okay, I’d love to join you for a beer,” Mike answered back.

“Just wait a damn second, you two. The treasure, we know where it is! Let’s go get it!” Katie yelled at Grady and Mike who stopped and turned to stare at her.

“Katie, calm down—” Mike started to say before Katie cut him off.

“I won’t calm down. We’ve been working on this a hell of a lot longer than you have. I can’t believe that we’re not down there digging it up right now,” she explained.

“Katie, lower your voice. We’re right here. There’s no need to yell. If you want us to go dig it up right now, we will. Without question. But first, I want you to answer two questions. Okay, just two questions and we’ll all trot our butts out there and dig to your heart’s content. Is that fair?” Grady asked his daughter.

“Okay fine. What’s the questions?” she asked in a very sarcastic tone.

“Remember the other night when you told me that both of you thought you were being watched. Remember that?” Grady asked her.

“Yeah, what about it?” she asked.

“We’re being watched right now,” Grady told all of them.

“Where?” Mike was the first to ask.

“Look across the field. Next to the big oak. See it?” he asked as they all stared out the window at the big oak.

“I don’t see anything, just something flashing. What is that?” Melissa asked.

“Well either it’s a squirrel wearing jewelry, or that’s the sun reflecting off of a spy scope or binoculars. I noticed it around the place at different locations about a day or two before Katie told me that the both of you thought that you were being watched,” he told them.

“So what are you going to do, just leave him out there?” Mike asked.

“Don’t make one ounce of difference to me if he sits out there all day or all night if he wants to,” Grady replied.

“And what was the second question?” Katie asked.

“Oh, yeah, if we were to go out and dig it up, considering it was brought here in at least six wagons, what would you suggest that we do with it then?”

“Katie, it’s been there that long. No reason to rush into things now, okay? It ain’t going anywhere. Relax. Now about that beer, Michael?” Grady asked.

“Right behind ya,” Mike said as the two men left the room.

“Melissa?” asked Katie.

“Yeah, what’s up, hon?” he asked.

“Did I just yell at my dad and Mike too?” she asked.

“Sure did,” Melissa told her.

“Oh my god! I’ve never yelled at my daddy before, never. And poor Mike, oh, God, I can’t believe I yelled at him too. And all over some stupid treasure,” Katie told her in as very soft subdued voice.

“Katie, it’s okay. They understand. We’re all excited about the treasure. You just lost it, that’s all. Me, I’m more freaked out knowing someone is out there watching us. That’s creepy,” Melissa explained.

“Well, if you promise not to tell, we could have a little fun with him. Give him something to look at, if you know what I mean?” Katie asked.

Melissa took one look out the window then at Katie. “You don’t mean two moons over Savannah, do ya?” she asked.

“Hell yeah, why not?” Katie replied.

“You’re on! Bare? Of course, bare! What was I thinking?” she said. Both girls pulled their undergarments down around their ankles and placed themselves in front of the window. When Katie said okay, both ladies pulled their skirts up and flashed their bare asses at the person across the field. They were laughing so hard neither of them heard Mike come back into the room.

“Is this a private showing?” he asked.

Both of them suddenly stood up.

“What? We weren’t doing anything,” Katie said as she tried to keep a straight face. Melissa wasn’t helping as she was giggling as hard as Katie was.

Mike just smiled as he looked at these two grown ladies with their undergarments still around their ankles. Mike kind of pointed to them, and they both realized it at the same time and stooped to pull them back up.

“You won’t tell Daddy, will you? Please I’m sorry that I yelled at you,” Katie pleaded.

“What? I didn’t see a thing. So would you, ladies, like some ice tea or, better yet, some moonshine?” he asked as he turned and laughed, walking from the attic. “I just kill myself!” he said out loud as he walked down the hallway.

# Golden Double Eagles and Skeletons Too

Katie didn't know about the others, but she hadn't slept a wink last night. Everything, the treasure, the person watching them, those horses, everything, all made it nearly impossible to sleep. And while she had little or no sleep, she was surprised to see how much energy she had.

Today was the day that they were going to make sure the treasure was really there. They had all talked last night and came up with a plan. Grady was going to the bank. Since it was agreed that the person in the woods was most likely Barnes, Grady would go there and keep him busy for one full hour. One hour should be long enough to break through into the cellar and see what's there. Melissa and Katie would keep a watchful eye as Mike would go down into whatever you wanted to call it. It was in fact the basement from the original Matterson House, but it was also the resting spot for the treasure for over ninety years, so it was a vault as well. But never in their wildest dreams did they ever consider it a tomb. And a tomb was what it was indeed.

After locating the weakest spot in the ground with a pole, the dirt was slid aside and the boards covering the hole for the past ninety years were moved over just enough to allow Mike to go down and take a look.

The flashlight that he held gave off an eerie glow among the darkness. Shadows seemed to cast shadows on shadows. This was by far worse than the cave, he thought to himself. Nearly ninety years of rain that had made its way into the vault had taken its toll. The air was still and quiet, yet there was an overpowering smell of mildew and decay. At several different locations through the vault, several beams of sunlight shone down into the hole. These were where people had stepped onto a weak spot and almost fell through. Everyone thought that they were just gopher holes. But even with the scattered beams of light, the vault was still very dark. What made it worse was the fact that he was alone or at least he was the only person in there that was still alive. At first, Mike was only interested in the many

boxes that were so neatly stacked on top of each other. He tried to lift one. It was heavy. As he tried to lift it again, it fell apart in his hands, its contents spilling out onto the floor. At first, he just cursed beneath his breath. But as the light of the flashlight shone down on the contents of the box, his heart started to race. Maybe a hundred or so of the double-eagle gold coins sparkled in the light.

“Oh my god!” he said out loud. But as he stooped to get a closer look, the light caught a sight that made him want to get out there just as fast as he could. There, only a few feet from where he stood, were skeletons, human skeletons. And there seemed to be a lot of them. All of them seemed to be staring at him. He didn’t wait around for any formal introductions. He came out of that small hole like an egg through a hen.

He sat there on the ground fighting to regain himself as Katie and Melissa kept asking questions, like what did he see? Was the treasure there? and other questions.

He just looked at the two women and started to smile. All of their questions were answered. Together, they resealed the vault the best that they could and went back to the house to wait for Grady.

When Grady walked into the house, their expressions told him what he needed to know. Then Mike told them about the skeletons.

“Skeletons?” Katie asked.

“I would have to say that Mike here just found the drivers of the wagons. Most likely they were killed to seal their silence,” Grady told them.

“Well, I’m sure glad that I didn’t go down there,” Melissa said.

“Well, if I had gone down there, someone would have had to come to my rescue. I would have fainted right there,” Katie added.

“Did any of you think about what Saturday is?” Grady asked.

“The Fourth of July?” Melissa asked.

“Yes. And what a better day to unveil our find to the world?” he asked. That gives us only four days to notify the proper authorities. So, Katie, you know what your job is?” he asked her.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve got it all written out. Finished it weeks ago. Wasn’t too sure that I was going to be able to use it, but I was wrong I suppose,” she answered.

“Katie, what in the world are you talking about?” Mike asked.

“It’s a surprise. I guess you’ll have to wait until the third,” she answered.

“The third? Don’t you mean the fourth?” Melissa responded.

“Nope, mine is going to be one day early. You’ll see, just wait,” she answered.

“You two can help by contacting some local and some not so local government agencies. The more people we let in on this, the better. I’ve already talked with the Treasury Department,” Grady told them.

“You have? What did they say when you told them?” Mike asked.

“Well, at first they thought that I was clear off my rocker. But when I mentioned Jack, they suddenly had a change of heart. It seems that my charming brother also found a few of those gold coins and sent them off to Washington. I guess those coins caused a pretty big ruckus in Washington. But for obvious reasons, they never heard anything more from Jack. And given what was going on then years ago, they didn’t have the manpower to track him down. Remember, World War Two was just ending, and there was a lot to do. But now there’s more agents to handle stuff like this, I reckon,” Grady explained.

“And you didn’t tell us this for what reason?” Katie asked.

“Katie, daddies don’t tell their daughters everything. Sometimes it’s better to keep the cat in the bag so you don’t get scratched. There’s a lot of bad, evil people out there that would love to get their hands on what we have. Some out of personal greed. Others might want it just so the Union Army and your great-grandfather wouldn’t be cleared. Whatever their reasons are, we had to play it safe. Our very lives hang in the balance here,” Grady explained.

“Gee, I never thought about someone killing us to steal it—again,” Katie answered.

“Well, here’s the thing. We still have four days, so we’re not out of the woods yet. They had offered to have an agent here for our protection. But I declined that offer. But I think that now that we know its exact location, I might just take them up on their offer. For our own protection at least,” Grady explained.

“Do you really think we need bodyguards? I mean, really?” Mike asked.

“Well, answer me this. Would you give up the treasure to save Katie’s life or that of your sister? If you say no, then you would be a liar, but if you answered yes, then you’ve proven my point,” Grady told him.

“I agree with you. It would indeed be the safe play. If not for anything more than peace of mind, I suppose,” Mike answered.

“Exactly, but they wouldn’t have to threaten just us. What about your parents? Or maybe Rick since Melissa likes him. There’s more ways to get to us and the gold than what’s in this room. We have to cover everything and everyone,” Grady explained.

# The Gold of the South

Bodyguards? Oh, what an understatement that soon turned out to be. At first, only two men from the Treasury Department showed up. But after hearing their astounding tale and reading the ninety-year-old letters and, well, everything else, Matterson House soon got a few guests. Well, if fifty government agents were considered a few, then that's what they got. They carried guns and were very professional. Everywhere they turned, there was another agent. The nice, quiet landscape soon turned into a three-ring media circus.

Reporters from every newspaper in America as well as a few from Europe and France were all over the place. But only one reporter was given an exclusive on the breaking story. The reporter for the *Charleston Herald* was chosen for this honor because of the paper's size, their vast circulation, and their overall reputation. This was Katie's baby. She owed it to her late great-grandfather's legacy. On the morning of July 3, Katie and the others sat down with Robert Kincaid and told him every detail. Nothing would be left out. Well, nothing except for the gold's exact location, that is. The reporter at first wasn't buying their story. Then Katie took the reporter's hand in hers.

"Maybe this will open your eyes," she told him as she pulled her hands away, leaving one of the golden double-eagle coins in his palm. From that point on, he was a true believer. Katie hoped his pen wouldn't run out of ink.

But the exclusive wasn't free. Nope, there was a price to be paid. No money, but the written promise that this headline would be on the front page of tomorrow's paper for all the world to see.

major general william tecumseh sherman cleared on any wrongdoing in the  
greatest crime of the civil war

The article that followed the headline would go into great details in regard to what actually happened and why. Nothing would be left out.

The reporter wrote and wrote everything that was told him. He was afraid that he hadn't brought enough paper. Five full tablets later, the complete story had been told.

"My god, and you've found the gold? I mean of course you have, or I wouldn't be here, would I? Still, this is a fantastic tale. Our readers are going to want more and more information about all of this," he told them.

"Well, if you do the job that we hope you will on this first story, then you'll be able to come back and take all the pictures that you want and do as many stories as you want. How's that?"

"Then I guess that I'll be seeing you tomorrow then. But if that's everything, I need to run. I have a lot of work to do before press time," he said.

"Well, you do whatever it takes. Just tell the story the way that it happened. That's all we ask," Katie told him.

"Oh, trust me, it's a hell of a tale, and I'll get it right," he said. And with that, the reporter left.

Katie walked over to the window. "Look at all of these people. My god, there must be a thousand or more. And those reporters are driving me nuts," Katie said as she stared out the front window.

"Oh, I don't think you've seen the worse of it yet. Just wait until tomorrow when we uncover it," Grady told her.

"Yeah, especially the part about the skeletons. Those rookie reporters haven't a clue as to what's down there. I've seen it. It's not a picture to be sending home. That's for sure," Mike added.

Just then, a man walked into the front room. The Treasury agents had free run of the house, so it didn't surprise anyone to see him.

"Grady, I was told to see you. I'm Aaron James of the Treasury Department. I'm also the agent in charge of security here," the man said as he shook Grady's hand.

“Yes, sir, what can I do for you?” Grady asked.

“It’s the treasure, sir. We can’t protect it if we don’t know where it is,” he told Grady.

“The treasure is fine right where it is. I’ll tell you where it is when it’s time,” Grady told him.

“Sir, if it’s as big as you claim, it’s a matter of national security to do whatever needs to be done to protect it. You do understand?” he asked.

“Yes, sir, I do, but I can see it from here, and you’ll just have to trust me. It’s fine right where it is,” Grady told him.

“Well, I can see that you’re set in your stand on this matter. But may I ask you just how you plan on unveiling all of this? I mean, considering everything that you claim, it’s going to be a pretty big show. So how do you plan on pulling this off?” he asked.

“Well, we have that all set up. The treasure is buried, and we’re not certain just how big this is, but we have about ten guys—your guys, I believe—that will be doing the actual work. Once it’s uncovered, it will be up to you guys to remove it, count it, and whatever else needs to be done. Then of course, there are the skeletons that will have to be removed,” Grady told him.

“Skeletons? What skeletons? Nobody told me about any skeletons. I hate skeletons,” the agent told Grady.

“Well, there are skeletons. Not sure just how many, but they’re there. That’s for certain. Should be at least six of them, maybe more,” Grady told him.

“And what’s this about some dead horses?” he asked.

“Well, those are in a cave. Those we can tell you or even show you now if you wish. But there’s skeletons there too,” Grady told him.

“What’s this interest you guys have in skeletons?” he asked.

“We have no interest in skeletons, but when the treasure was brought here from Columbia ninety years ago, it was in wagons. Those horses are still hitched to their wagons. And I have to warn you, the sight of those poor

animals and knowing how they died, will rip out your very soul and throw it on the ground and stomp on it until your soul is dead. It's a very heart-touching scene," Grady told him.

"You're kidding, right?" he asked. "I mean, it sounds pretty intense! Dead horses and all."

"Well now, my dear sir, that would greatly depend on one's own constitution now, would it not? To some people, they would only see some dead horses. While others will be animals that fought to survive under enormous odds, animals whose fate was sealed in that tomb by a wall of rock but refused to concede to the fact that they would never run through a green pasture or eat a bucket of oats again. So what you see when you look at this nightmarish scene would all depend on how you see yourself. Would you just give up and die, or would you fight for your life even when the odds are greatly against you? That's a choice that every one of us has to make in our own lives. So are you a fighter or a quitter?" Grady asked.

"Well, to be honest with you. I've never been forced into that scenario before. But I would like to think that I'm a fighter," he answered.

"You, my dear sir, are a quitter. Now, don't go getting all bent out of shape here. I only mean that because you've said that you have never been faced with that choice before. Well, a fighter, a true fighter, doesn't need to be forced into making that choice. A fighter already knows. Quitting for him is not an option," Grady told him.

"I see your point. And I would also be inclined to conclude the same observation as you. I do not picture myself as a fighter," he told Grady.

"That's fine, I mean, if you want to demean yourself, but if when you see this scene that was played out some ninety years ago, and you just shrug your shoulders and walk away, then you are a quitter. But if you look at it and you get sick to your stomach, and every muscle tightens up in your neck, and you think that you're about to throw up, then you're a fighter.

"There are but three ways to die.

"You can fight with every bit of strength that you can find. And, like those horses, you never give up your will to live. And even after death, you

live on.

“Or you take a quick look at the situation and decide that there’s no way to win. And you simply give up and die. Is it the easy way out? Maybe. But at least you had the guts to make a decision and stick to it.

“And then there’s the cowardly way. Crouching down in a corner with your arms over your head, whining and crying. And it’s all about him. He doesn’t want to die, it ain’t his time, and so on. Have you ever seen an animal cry for its life? No, of course not. But people do it all the time. I feel sorry for the poor son of a bitch that thinks he needs to die that way. Damn coward.

“As for me, I’m a fucking horse, and I’m going out with a fight. And my pride and my honor, they’re going with me,” Grady told him.

“Wow! That’s a very strong way of thinking. Never heard it put that way before, that’s for sure. But after listening to you explain it, I think I’ll be going with you, uh, when it’s my time of course,” he said to Grady with a smile.

“Oh, but of course. But when it’s your time to go, it is your time to go. The timing of our death isn’t a choice we get to make, but how we die is,” Grady told him.

“I’ll try to remember that when it’s time,” he replied.

“You do that. Want’a go for a walk?” Grady asked him.

“It’s getting dark out there. Let me grab a jacket,” he said.

“Son, it’s July, and you’re in Georgia. What in the hell would you want a jacket for?” Grady asked.

“Government protocol. But you know what? You’re right. Let’s go,” the man responded in a tone that surprised Grady.

Grady signaled to Katie, and she came over to him. He whispered something into her ear. She turned to face him.

“Okay, but are you sure?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Just do as I asked, and we’ll meet you on the porch,” he told her, just as she turned and walked away.

“You ready?” Grady asked.

“I think so. What was all that about?” he asked.

“You’ll see in due time,” Grady replied with a smile.

Grady and Aaron walked out onto the porch. There were people everywhere, each person going about their assigned tasks. Katie met them on the porch and walked with the two men as they walked across the field. When they got to the dirt road, they followed it. There was some small talk between the two of them. They turned up the small path that lead up to the grassy area overlooking the town.

When they got to the center of the area, Katie handed her dad two cold bottles of beer, one of which he handed to Aaron.

“Oh, you know I couldn’t, government rules you know. Being on duty and all,” he said.

“Take the damn beer. And sit down. I have something to tell you. No drink, no talk,” Grady insisted.

“Okay, I’ll sit with you and have a beer,” Aaron told him as he took the beer and sat down on the nice soft grass.

Katie sat down too facing the two men.

“So tell me, Mr. Government Man, what is it that you hope to see here tomorrow?” Grady asked.

“Well, the treasure for one, among other things. Why do you ask?” he asked.

“How close have you ever been to a treasure of this size? I know that you haven’t seen it yet, but it was big enough to put the Confederate Army out of business, so it’s fairly big. Right?” Grady asked.

“Well, I’ve never been close, not at all. Maybe within thirty yards or so when I toured Fort Knox. Why do you ask?” he asked.

“Katie, tell him,” Grady told his daughter.

Aaron's attention turned to Katie.

"Tell me what?" he asked.

"Mr. James, right now your ass is about one foot away from the entire treasure of the South," she told him.

His face went pale as he realized what she had said. He went to stand up, but Grady pulled him back down.

"Calm down. We don't need everyone up here," Grady told him.

"You're serious! The treasure is beneath us right now?" he asked.

"Sure is, want to see it?" Grady asked.

"Hell yeah! Oh, wait, there's skeletons down there, and besides, it's dark. I'll wait until tomorrow like everyone else," he told them.

Katie pulled two flashlights from her pockets and handed one to Grady and the other one to the Treasury agent. "Are all of you government men chicken?" she asked.

He just looked at her and then at Grady. Then he glanced down at the flashlight. "Oh hell, where's the door?" he asked.

Katie lead them to the spot where Michael had gone in the day before. It took them a while, but they made an opening large enough to enter.

Aaron just looked at Grady.

"You first. You've got the gun, remember?" Grady asked.

"What would I need a gun for?" Then he realized that Grady had been joking with him. "Very funny!" he said as he slowly started to lower himself down into the hole.

Grady soon followed him. The two men stood there in the dark where no man had stood for almost ninety years. Well, except for Michael of course.

And there, before their very eyes, were several wooden boxes all stacked neatly on top of each other. Each box was branded with the Confederate seal.

Grady's flashlight found the box that Michael had described dropping. And just like Michael had said, gold coins littered the floor. Grady pointed them out to Aaron.

"This is fantastic, utterly fantastic! There must be over four hundred boxes in here. And those," he said as he pointed at the stack of human skeletons.

"Oh, yeah, forgot about those guys. Ooppss!" Grady said with a smile. "Have you seen enough?" he asked.

"Not really, I'd like to look around a little bit more if you don't mind. This is interesting stuff down here," he answered.

"Please be my guest. I'll wait. Take your time," Grady answered back.

Susie walked along the trail that led through the darkened forest of trees and shadows. The shotgun that she carried gave her the power to do what needed to be done a long time ago. And she was the only one that could do it. All of the torment of her life had to end now, this very night.

As Aaron climbed from the hole, something crashed into the back of his head. His lifeless body fell to the ground. Grady hadn't realized that he had been hit, but rather he had just slipped or something. But as he climbed out of the hole, he soon knew better. Grady looked up at Katie.

Katie signaled with her head. Grady spun around to see Barnes standing there before him. When the gun crashed into the side of head, it was a surprise. Grady fell to the ground dazed but conscious.

"Barnes, you backstabbing son of a bitch," Grady called him.

"Shut up, ole man. Thanks for finding my grandfather's gold. I knew you would," he told him.

"This ain't your grandfather's gold. Your grandfather was a thief. This belongs to the South!" Katie yelled back at him.

"I'd watch my mouth if I were you, missy. Or I can shoot you first. Don't make no difference to me. First, second. Either way, the both of you are going to die," he told her.

“Go ahead, asshole. There’s a thousand government agents or so at our house. What do you plan on doing, killing all of them?” she asked.

“Never said that I was going to kill you here, did I? Get up, Grady. You ain’t hurt—yet.”

“There ain’t going to be no more killing, Pa,” came a voice from behind Barnes.

Barnes turned to see his daughter standing about ten feet away from him. The shotgun sat against her shoulder leveled at her father’s head.

“Susie, what are you doing here? Go home. I don’t need your help here. So git!” he yelled at her.

“I ain’t here to help ya, Pa. I’m aiming to put a stop to all of this fighting and killing,” she told him.

Grady and Katie just watched in amazement.

“What in the Sam hell are you talking about? There ain’t been no killing, not yet anyways. And put that shotgun down before you shoot someone. Mainly me,” he told her.

“I watched you kill that guy ten years or so ago. You shot him in cold blood. I saw you do it. Now put the gun down, Father,” she said.

“Susie, I’m you’re father. Now, do as I say, dammit! Go home!” he yelled at her.

“You ain’t my father. I don’t know who you are, but I watched the man that I called father die. When you buried that guy, you buried my father along with him, you son of a bitch. Put the gun down. Now!” she demanded.

“Susie, I’m not telling you again. Go home! We’ll talk about this later!” he yelled at her.

“No, goddammit. Katie is my friend, and you’re not going to hurt her. Now, for the last time, drop the fucking gun! Do it now, or I swear I’ll—” Barnes cut her off.

“Or you’ll do what? Shoot me? I don’t think so. You ain’t got what it takes. Yeah, I shot that guy. What was his name? Oh yeah, Rings. And I’m going to shoot Katie and Grady too. Hell, Katie threw your ass in jail, and now you’re protecting her?” he asked her.

“Yeah well, maybe so, but she did one thing that you’ve never done,” she told him.

“Yeah? And what was that?” he asked.

“She believed in me. Hell, you never even came to jail to see me. But she did. So I’m telling you for the very last time. Put the damn gun down!” she yelled at him.

Barnes was going to point in the direction of their house as he told her to go home. His big mistake was when he used the hand holding the gun. Susie had no choice as he brought the handgun up pointed in her direction.

She pulled both triggers of the side-by-side at the same time. Two barrels of double odd buck found its way into her father’s right shoulder, spinning him around before he fell to the ground. The force of the double-barrels going off at the same time knocked Susie backward, landing on her ass.

Katie grabbed Barnes’s gun and rushed over to Susie. “Hey, you . . . are you okay?” Katie asked.

“Yeah, did I shoot him?” she asked.

“Oh yeah, you shot him all right,” Katie told her with a grin.

“Did I . . . kill him?” she asked.

Katie looked over at Grady as he bent over Barnes’s body. Grady told her, “He’ll live.”

“Your father will survive. But that took a lot of courage to do what you just did. And I do mean a lot. Thank you ever so much,” Katie told her as they exchanged hugs.

“That’s what friends do, ain’t it?” she asked.

“We sure do, friend,” Katie answered.

Suddenly, they were surrounded by government agents, all with their guns out. And Mike was the first one to reach Katie's side. "What in the hell happened?" he asked. "We heard gunshots!"

"Susie here just saved our lives," she told him.

"Susie?" he asked as he first looked at Susie and then over at Barnes as he was being treated and placed under arrest.

"You shot your own father? You put their lives before his?" he asked.

"Well, I didn't mean to. I mean that I didn't want to, but he pointed his gun at me. So I pulled the trigger," she told him.

"Well, I think that I may have underestimated you. And for that I'm sorry," he said.

"I did what had to be done. Is that other guy going to be all right?" she asked.

"Oh, you mean good ole Aaron here? He's a government man. He might have a bump on his noggin for a day or two, but he'll live," Grady answered.

"Hey, Grady!" Aaron called.

Grady looked at him and smiled.

"Next time, you go first. I'll even give you my gun," he told him with a smile.

"You know we can all sit up here on the grass on our asses all night long, but we do have a pretty big day tomorrow, remember?" Katie told all of them.

"Ya know, she's right. Let's all go home," Grady told them.

Now considering all of the excitement of the night before and that of the following day, it was no surprise to anyone that nobody got any sleep at all. Melissa had shown up about thirty minutes after all of the shooting had stopped. And she complained that she always happened to miss the good shit.

Now it's a known fact that if you want to keep something a secret, you'd be better off just forgetting that idea because someday, somehow, someone somewhere will find out about it, and the next thing you know, everybody and their mothers knows about it. And this was no exception. Everyone knew about it because everyone was there. More people filed into Mattersonville than ever before. And it was also surprising to find out that people in general could actually pull a rabbit out of their ass if the situation called for it.

Now, nobody knew where they got them, especially on such short notice, but the Preservation Society showed up with over twenty-five glass display cases, all of which were framed with polished oak frames. And they spent hours going through all of the original documents that had been removed from the safe, three hundred and twenty six in all, and carefully placed each piece of paper, large and small, into these display cases so everyone could view the documents, but they would be protected when pressed between the two pieces of glass. And they set them up on easels in the main entrance to Matterson House. It was a very impressive display of American history indeed.

The Sons of the Confederacy showed up in all of their splendor. Each of them wearing vintage costumes of the Confederate Army. Each of them carried a vintage Civil War musket and all of the gear that the actual soldiers had carried across these actual grounds so long ago.

And if you have ever wondered whatever became of all of those Confederate flags, well wonder no more. For they were all there on display, waving in the Georgia sun, flapping to the warm breeze that blew. With all of the Confederate memorabilia that was on hand, one might expect to see General Lee ride up on his noble steed and start barking orders to his loyal men.

Then someone said something to the effect that there wasn't any cannons or cannonballs. Remember what I said about the rabbit? Well, within hours, they had cannons—both Confederate and Union models. They were staggered across the large meadow, facing one another as if at any time, you would expect them to start firing at one another.

There were several white tents set up all over the place. Several of them were fully supplied with everything that those brave souls carried into battle so long ago. Many of the tents had little fires burning in makeshift fire rings. They came complete with some hot coffee and a spare cup offered up to anyone that just wanted to sit a spell and listen to some southern folklore as told by the owner of the camp just as if he had been there in battle nearly one hundred years earlier. And there was plenty of good ole southern music too. But if you happened not to care for a particular tune, you could simply walk a few feet to the next tent and hear a whole new melody.

The cave that held the wagons and those skeletal remains of the horses was opened, and guards were posted to keep the honest people honest. You would be surprised at what people would try to steal just so they could have their own little bit of history to take home.

But out of respect for the horses, they were left as they had been found until they could each receive a proper burial. That was at the insistence of Katie and Melissa.

Lights were set up in the cave so people could view the scene and see for themselves what had happened there in the dark unforgiving cave so long ago.

Katie stood there on the front porch, struck in total amazement as to everything that was happening in her very own front yard. Then a man called out to her, and she turned to greet him.

“Well, good morning to you, my dear sir, did you get it?” she asked as she had recognized the gentleman as being the reporter for the *Boston Herald*.

“Yes, ma’am, I did, and good morning to you too. You’ve got one hell of a show going on here. Very impressive if I do say so myself,” he told her.

Katie didn’t respond to his small talk. “The paper please,” she asked as he held her hand out.

“Oh, yes, of course the paper, I’m sorry. Here you go,” he told her as he handed her the morning edition of the *Boston Herald* for July 4, 1955. And there it was printed in big bold type.

major general william tecumseh sherman cleared on any wrongdoing in the greatest crime of the civil war

Katie just smiled. "Thank you, my dear sir. You got it right," she told him as she gave the unexpected man a light hug.

"Well, you're welcome, miss. I told my publisher that it had to be just like you wanted," he told her.

"Well, on behalf of my family, you tell your publisher thank you. So are you going to stick around for the real fireworks, or do you have somewhere to go?" she asked.

"Miss, you couldn't pry me away from all of this. I'm here for the duration," he told her.

"Well, good. Make yourself at home. There's food. Well, there's food everywhere I guess," she said as she looked around to see food cooking everywhere.

"Thank you, I smell chicken cooking. I think I'll go track it down," he said as he turned and walked away with his nose in the air.

Now out of the respect due to those poor souls whose skeletons were found next to the gold, it was decided that the public would not be allowed to view the removal of their remains. Heavy security was set all around the area as the local doctors, with the help of an especially trained medical team from Washington, removed each body as slowly as possible. It was extremely difficult because every time one bone was touched, five or six more would fall off. Keeping the right bones together with the right body proved to be a very tiring task.

Aaron James watched as they picked bone by bone from their eerie graves. There wasn't much left of their clothing, but what little did remain suggested that they were in fact slaves, black slaves forced to help one white man steal from another white man. And all they got for their trouble was a bullet to the back of their heads. The times might have been different back then, but wrong was still wrong. And it always would be. Slavery was

wrong and so was murder regardless of one's color. But this was the south where the laws of the land were very seldom overlooked when it came to the colored folk. Even now in 1955, being black around here wasn't the easiest thing to conquer.

Mike and Katie sat there at a table under a large oak. In front of them sat plates overflowing with everything from Cajun to southern style finger-licking food.

"Do you believe this madness? I mean, shit, where in the hell did all of these people come from?" Katie asked.

"Got me. I know that those guys over there are from California, and there's talk about some people all the way from Oregon. How did they get here this quick? It's beyond me," he told her.

Grady walked up behind them and put his hands on his daughter's shoulders. She turned to look at him.

"Daddy, where did you take off to? I looked all over but I couldn't find ya," she told him.

"Had to get lost for a while. Too damn many people. But speakin' of people, could you come with me?" he asked. "There's some people that I really think you need to meet."

"Sure. Michael, do you mind?" she asked.

"No, go ahead. Don't worry about me. I'll just sit here and feed my face," he answered as he took another bite off of a chicken leg.

Grady led Katie over to where Melissa was talking with three very handsome gentlemen.

"Well, well, looks like you found yourself three good-looking guys. Does Rick know?" she asked half kidding with her.

"They're not my friends. They're yours," Melissa answered.

Katie stared at the three guys standing before her. "No, I'm sorry, but if I had three friends that looked like these guys, I would have remembered them for sure," Katie told them.

“Well, we’re sorry for crashing your party, miss, but we just wanted to stop by and say thank you once again,” one of the men told her.

“You’re not crashing my party, but I have to ask. Thank you for what?” she asked.

“You really don’t remember us, do you?” another one of the men asked her.

“Okay, I’m really sorry, but I don’t know who any of you are?” she told them again.

“Well, my name is Delroy, and this here is Billy Ray, and that’s Leroy,” one of the men told her.

Katie had to take a few steps back. If her jaw had dropped any more, her foot would have gone into her mouth.

“You’re the guys from the cave?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am, we are. I sure hope you don’t mind us stopping by, I mean, considering what we was going to do to ya and all,” Delroy asked her.

“Well, I’ll be! Jus’ look at ya all. All spit and polished like ya are. Wow, you got all cleaned up’d just to come say thank you. How sweet ya all are,” she told them.

“Well, not exactly, ma’am. Ya see, ever since that night that ya gave us a chance, well, we’ve changed. We got some new clothes with that hundred dollars that that girl paid us, and well, we even have girlfriends and all,” he told her.

“You’re kidding me, right? You changed around your lives just because I gave you a break, and you did it all in less than a week?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. In fact, Billy Ray and I are starting new jobs on Monday. And it’s because of you, miss,” Delroy told her.

Katie turned to look at Melissa. “Do you believe this?” she asked.

“I know. That’s what I said. Katie, I don’t know how you keep turning turds into diamonds, but you’ve done it again,” Melissa told her.

Billy Ray looked at Katie. “Miss, are you . . . like crying?” he asked.

“It’s okay. It’s a good cry. You know what, guys, I don’t think I’ve ever been so touched than I am right now,” she said as she gave each of them a huge hug.

“You guys are my guests here today. And I won’t take no for an answer. Is that understood?” she asked with a smile.

“Ma’am, it would be an honor to attend this here party,” Leroy told her.

“No, the honor is all ours,” Mike said as he reached out and shook their hands. Katie turned to look into his face.

“And just how long have you been standing there?” she asked.

“The entire time. Your daddy signaled me to follow ya. So I did,” he confessed.

“Then you know who these guys are?” she asked.

“Yes, dear, I do. But the main thing here is not what they once were and what they are now. I, for one, am truly impressed,” he answered her.

“In less than a week, do you believe that?” she asked.

“Katie, ever since I started hanging around you, it’s been one surprise after another. So nothing shocks me anymore when it comes to you,” he told her.

Katie turned to look at her daddy. “Daddy, do you believe these are the same guys from that cave?” she asked.

“Well, I reckon so. But there’s something that you seem to be forgettin’, ain’t there?” he asked her.

“Forgettin’ something? Like what?” she asked.

“Well, as bad as raping you—or attempting to at least—was, in fact, had they not agreed to what Susie had planned, then I wouldn’t had found that first coin, which led us to the horses and then to here. So in fact, if it wasn’t for these three gentlemen, we might not even be here today. Did you ever think of that?” he asked.

“By gosh, Daddy, you’re absolutely right. If these guys hadn’t agreed to do Susie’s bidding, none of this would have been possible. Ain’t that a weird turn of events?” she proclaimed.

The main event, the actual uncovering of the treasure was slated to begin at three o’clock. But that all depended on how the removal of the skeletons progressed. And as hard as it was, they were actually ahead of schedule.

After talking it over between the four of them, the guys had decided to bow out to the ladies, giving them the job of speaking to the large crowd. The stage that had been built for Melissa’s party was moved up to grassy knoll and now supported a microphone and a public address system.

Neither of the two ladies knew what they were going to say, but they would come up with something.

Grady looked at the two confused ladies and shook his head at them. “You’re on your own, ladies. I guess you’ll work it out,” he told them as he walked away. As he approached the house, an elderly lady called to him.

“Mr. Windslow, Mr. Windslow, I’ve been looking for you,” she told him.

“Well as you can see you’ve found me. What can I do for you, miss?” he asked.

“Mr. Windslow, my name is Mrs. Linda Johnstone, and I’m with the National Parks Service, and I’ve been ordered to offer you an amazing offer, sir,” she told him.

“Well first off, Mrs. Johnstone, please call me Grady, and for secondly, if the United States government has a deal for me, I can’t see it being amazing to anyone except for maybe the government itself, but please do continue,” he answered.

“Very well, Grady, I have been authorized—no, *ordered* would be the correct word to deem this land as a national landmark,” she told him.

“A national landmark, are you kidding me? Why would I do that?” he asked.

“Because as a national landmark, we would be required to restore this beautiful house back to its original glory and splendor,” she told him.

“Oh really? And then what? Where would my and I daughter live?” he asked.

“No, no, you don’t understand. You don’t have to move. We’ll restore this house and the entire estate and maintain it. And you and your daughter will still own it and continue to live here,” she told him.

“So you’ll fix it up like she once was, and you’ll pay for it?” he asked.

“Yes, sir, and it will also be deemed as a national historical site. All you have to do is put up with some tourist every once in a while. And we’ll even pay you to manage the place. How’s that for an offer?” she asked.

“Well, I’m sorry to say that I’m not interested,” he told her.

“Excuse me? Why not, may I ask?” she asked.

“Here’s the deal. I’ll give you control of the entire homestead, but I’ll own it, you maintain it, and all, but there’s one more thing that you can do for me,” he said.

“And what might that be?” she asked.

Grady leaned over and whispered something into her ear.

“That’s it? That’s all that you want? Are you serious?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am, I guess that will be enough. So is it a deal?” he asked.

“But what about the house? We still get to restore it to its original glory and splendor, right?” she asked.

“Well, I’d be a fool not to agree to that now, wouldn’t I?” he asked.

“Well, I’ll have to confirm it with my boss, but I’m sure we will be more than willing to handle your request,” she told him.

“Well, you check with your boss, and you get back to me when you know, okay?” he asked.

“I will do just that. Thank you for your time, sir,” she said.

“You’re welcome, and thank you,” he told her as he went toward the house. As he was approaching the front porch of the house, he noticed Susie Barnes sitting in his rocking chair.

“Susie, are you all right, child? Have you been crying?” he asked.

“Oh, hi, Mr.Windslow, No, I’m fine, but I’ve been waiting for you. I have, or I should say we, have a problem,” she told him.

“How do we have a problem?” he answered.

“Ten years ago or so, I watched my daddy shoot a guy. I also watched him bury him. I never told anyone about it until last night. But this morning, I found out that the man that my daddy killed was your brother, Jack,” she told him.

“And? So where’s the problem?” Grady asked her.

“For the life of me, I can’t remember where he buried him. I was watching what he was doing, and not where he was doing it. You need to find him and give him a proper burial. But I can’t help you. And it’s making me sick. I’m so sorry,” she told him.

“Susie, right now with all of this going on, finding Jack isn’t a priority. I’m sure that later after all of this is done, we’ll find Jack, and then we’ll give him a proper burial. Okay?” he asked.

“Okay, but I still feel bad. And my mom and I found a letter that my dad got from the bank. I guess you own our house. So Mom told me to tell you that we’ll be moving as soon as we find somewhere else to live, okay?” she asked.

“Nobody told you to move, so don’t. Katie has this all worked out, okay? Nobody has to move anywhere, okay? So relax,” he told her.

“Mr. Windslow, why are the all of you being so nice to me? I’m a bitch, and I really don’t deserve all of this. Between you and your daughter, you’re treating me like a friend. Why, may I ask? Why do you do this?” she asked.

Grady sat down in the chair next to her.

“Susie, someday you’ll discover what Katie discovered a long time ago. Most people in the world are good-natured folk. Some of them kind of get lost or stray from their path. But a little kindness will set them straight.

It worked with you, and we met three really nice gentlemen today that it worked on. What you did last night told us and God that you’re back on the right path. It’s that simple. Do you understand?” he asked her.

“I think so. You know what? I was expecting this big old explanation, and it turns out to be the simplest thing in the world. Believing in the good of everyone, is that it?” she asked.

“Congratulations, you just moved to the front of the class.

“Even your father has some good in him, and you might start off my giving him a second chance. But that choice will be totally up to you,” he told her.

“My father? He killed your brother and would have killed you and Katie. Do you really think he deserves a second chance?” she asked.

“Well, what you had planned for Katie was pretty downright sick and mean, was it not? But Katie found it in her heart to forgive you . . . Didn’t she? Now as far as your father is concerned, greed will make even the best person go bad. And the greed in his family appears to go back a long way. So ask yourself this. Where is it supposed to end? Here or a couple more generations down the line? That’s the question that only you can answer. Just remember this, you’re not being asked to forget, just forgive.

“When a society forgets its past, chances are that it will happen again. And things like the Civil War and Pearl Harbor cannot ever happen again. That’s why it’s important to forgive but never forget your past. So by remembering what you had planned for Katie, for an example, chances are, it will never happen again. And that will make ya a better person. Okay?” he told her.

“But it all sounds too easy,” she told him.

“Susie, in a world that’s as crazy and as hard as ours, you have to believe that sometimes the very best ideas are just that—simple. Not every thing has to be a mathematical equation. But you have a lot of learning and

growing to do as a person. And sometimes, that growing and learning will come to you in giant steps, sometimes not. All you have to do is take that next step whenever you see the opportunity. The good Lord will guide you if you let him,” he said

“You know what? You’re right, and I will do just that. Thank you for explaining it to me. I won’t let you down, I promise,” she told him.

“Well, I hope that you do. But you wouldn’t be letting me down nor Katie for that matter. You would only be letting yourself down. But remember this—if you stumble and fall, stand up straight and continue onward. Don’t worry yourself about what went wrong. Focus on what’s right. And I’m sure that you’ll be just fine,” he explained to her.

“Have you ever thought about being a minister ’cause you make it sound so easy?” she asked.

“Me a minister? For heaven’s sake no. I’m just an old man passin’ on what it took my whole life to learn,” he replied.

“Well, you’re very good at it,” she told him with a smile across her face.

“Well, there’s Katie and Melissa over there. Why don’t you go over there and ask Katie to introduce you to her new friends and see if forgiving doesn’t pay off in the long run, Okay?” he told her.

“I will, and thank you for taking the time to explain it to me,” she said as she got up to leave.

Grady stood up at the same time and gave her a hug. “Go, have some food and enjoy yourself,” he told her.

Just as Susie was walking away, Aaron came up onto the porch. “So are we ready to do this? I just got word that they’re removing the final remains as we speak. You do realize that this is a great day for the South, don’t you?” he asked.

“Don’t you mean it’s a great day for America? ’Cause the South is America, right?” Grady responded.

“Well, yes, but if this hadn’t happened, the outcome of the war might had turned out differently. The South might have won,” he responded.

“You know what? You make it sound like it was two countries fighting each other. It wasn’t. It was brother against brother. Friend against friend. Imagine looking down the sights of your rifle and seeing your best friend lined up in your sights. Could you pull the trigger, or would you hesitate? But if you hesitated one second too long, you might die. Whoever coined the phrase “war is hell” must have lived through the Civil War. And in a war like this, there’s never going to be a winner. We’re all losers. Our country lost so many brave men on both sides. We lost our unity as a nation. And for a while, we even lost ourselves. No, sir, when these guys stole the gold from the South, they may have saved us all. The war might have raged on for years. And at what cost? How many more would have died? So when you say that it might have ended differently, you best be thanking God that it didn’t,” Grady responded.

“Grady, you sound like you were there,” Aaron told him.

“Watch it, sonny. I ain’t that old. I’ll be turning seventy-six years old in a few months. I was born in 1879, fourteen years after that war ended. And as I grew up, I heard stories, horror stories, from those that fought in that godforsaken war. Terrible stories. And I could feel the hurt and their pain as those people told me those stories,” Grady told him.

“Well, I didn’t mean to offend you. I just didn’t know. I’m sorry,” Aaron apologized.

“Forget it. How could you have known? But that’s why it was so important for Katie and me to find the treasure. We just had to,” he explained.

“And you have. You should be proud of what you and your daughter have done here. I know that I respect you both for your unselfish acts. There are a lot of people out there like this Barnes character that would have wanted the gold for himself. But not you and Katie. No, sir, you have insisted from the beginning that it be returned to the rightful heirs that lost it when it was stolen. That’s an admirable quality indeed,” the agent replied.

“Maybe, but our family paid a hefty price to find it. My brother, Jack, was killed because he got too close, remember?” Grady asked in a tone that told of his grief.

“I’m truly sorry for your loss. But I’m sure Jack is looking down at you right now, and he’s mighty proud of the both of you,” Aaron told him.

“So what do say about uncovering the treasure of the South?” Grady asked.

“I’d say it’s about time. Let’s do it, shall we?” Aaron said as he put his arm across Grady’s shoulder.

# The Things that Dreams Are Made Of

It seemed as if even before the announcement was finished that the uncovering was about to start. Everyone was either at the grassy knoll or on their way already.

Sitting on the stage were a lot of local government spokesmen and some national spokesmen as well. Then there was Grady, Katie, Melissa, and Michael.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my name is William Scott, and I am the mayor of Mattersonville. And on behalf of everyone, we’d all like to welcome you all to this once-in-a-lifetime event. Never before in the history of America have we ever had the opportunity as a nation to rewrite such a tragic chapter in American history. The Civil War brought out the best in a lot of folks like those brave young men fighting and dying for what they believed in, or the parents that sent their young men off to fight in such a nasty arena as this. But it also brought out the worse of some as well. But this is true in any war as well as the times when there was no war. And through it all, America has had its list of heroes. Men like George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Lincoln, and the list goes on. But how do you decide whose name gets added to that distinguished list of names? Is it their lives’ accomplishments, or their one-time acts of patriotic duty? Is there a scale that we must use to see if one man’s deeds are worthy enough to allow his name to be added to such a list?

“Well, for this, I’m sorry to say that I don’t have an answer. But I will tell you this. There are a few people up here on this stage that should be added to that list. If for no other reason than it’s the right thing to do.

“You were all given pamphlets describing what actually transpired here some ninety years ago, so you already know their names. But they have asked that we do not ponder on their names but rather we focus on the events that lead us all here today. Well, if you ask me, that says more about

these people then my words could ever say. But I will tell them this—thank you all for everything that you have done and for what you are about to unveil for us here today. But before I let these two pretty young ladies have the microphone, I ask that you join Father Mathews as he leads us in a prayer. Father Mathews, if you would please?”

“Thank you, Mayor Scott. God does work in mysterious ways, does he not? And that is proven here today. All of you that have traveled far to join us here today were blessed with a safe journey.

“Our little often-forgotten town will be forgotten no more. Maybe we’ll even get a zip code of our own? Who knows? But we have been blessed with the addition of some very unselfish people to our town’s roster. And I have met with these people, and I can vouch for them. I’ve even been scolded by one of them a time or two. And, yes, I did deserve it, I might add. But through their journey to this time and place, their belief in God has been tested and retested. But they passed all of God’s tests. And now, their journey is almost over. For the treasure that they sought was not only a place in heaven but the righting of a tragic misjudgment of the truth that happened some ninety years ago.

“So I ask you now to join me in prayer, and I ask you to remember that we are praying for not only ourselves but also for the fourteen brave men that were discovered here in this makeshift tomb and for the remains of twelve horses that died here so long ago.

“Our father in heaven, we pray to you and give thanks for bringing us all here in the safety of your guidance. We pray to you that we all have a safe journey home. We ask that you welcome these fourteen brave souls, which never received a proper send-off to your kingdom until now. We pray to you oh, Lord, that you allow these horses to graze in your pastures and allow them to run free once more. We pray to you, Lord, that never again will our brave young men ever have to die in another war such as the one that took them from us. We thank you oh, Lord, for bringing us those that brought us a reason to gather here today. And we ask you for your guidance through the troubled times ahead of us. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

“And now it is my honor to introduce to you a very beautiful and talented young lady who had a major role in the search of what you’re about to see here today. Ladies and gentlemen, Ms. Katie Windslow.”

“Thank you, Father Mathews. Hello, everyone. My name is Katie Windslow. Eighty-some years ago when my grandfather was first told of this fantastic tale, nobody could have known that it would have taken this long to prove and find the stolen gold of the South. A lot of things had to happen to get us where we are today, and obstacles had to be overcome. Simple little things like a very stubborn safe for one. I watched my daddy bang on that stupid thing with everything that he could think of. But God came to our aid when he directed me to turn the dial and hit the numbers exactly right, allowing the safe to open. What we found inside would take us on a journey of a lifetime. The documents would take us on a journey through American history and made me wish that I had listened a little bit more when it came to my history classes in school. Hey, who knew?

“But while I could stand up here and tell you the story word by word, we have decided against that. That’s why we came out with the pamphlets that you all have. But before I tell the guys over there to open the vault that holds the treasure, I have a very important announcement to make. I was just informed about this decision not more than ten minutes ago. And I’m proud to announce to you that the fourteen skeletons found with the gold, along with the skeletons of those horses, will be all buried here on Matterson property. I find it an honor to have these graves here where everyone can visit them and pay tribute to them. After all, this was and shall always be their final resting place. So to all of those people that made this possible, I’d like to say thank you on behalf of all America. And now, I’d like you to meet my newest and dearest friend. And I have given her the privilege of giving the order to open the vault. So it’s my honor to introduce to you Ms. Melissa Gibbes.”

“Thank you, Katie. Good afternoon, everybody. Wow, that’s a great announcement, isn’t it? You know, when Grady and Katie first told me of this wild tale, as an American history student, I found it almost impossible to believe. But as you’re all about to see, it is not only a fantastic tale, but

it's also a story that takes us all back to the darkest times in American history, back to the Civil War.

“Many of our brave countrymen died defending what they believed in. So as these guys finish the removal of those remaining wooden planks that cover the greatest discovery since the landing of the pilgrims on Plymouth Rock, I ask you all to remember those brave men that died in that nasty and unforgiving war.

“So, gentlemen, if you would please—now this might take a little time because first they have to remove the remaining boards and then carefully lift each and every box out of that hole that knows no time. So please bear with them.

“And we now give you THE GOLD OF THE SOUTH!”

There was a tremendous roar from the crowd that had remained totally speechless since this had all started. Everyone watched as the men slowly removed about ten of the remaining boards covering the gold. The dirt and the grass that once covered the boards had been removed earlier so nobody had to watch men shovel dirt. Yeah, as if that would have been something to watch.

The men assigned to the task of removing the gold formed a chain, with each man handing the boxes with its precious contents to the next man in line. It was a slow process, but it was the best way to get the gold out in the open. When the men had about twenty of the boxes out, Mike and Grady approached the stack of boxes, and Michael carried one of the heavy boxes up onto the stage and sat it onto a heavy wooden table.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is what dreams are made of. This is the Gold of the South,” Grady told them as Michael hit the side of the wooden box with a hammer. As the wooden box fell apart, its contents poured out onto the table and some of it onto the stage. Solid gold coins glistened in the bright Georgia sun. The crowd went wild.

But one of the coins rolled across the stage directly at a little girl standing behind the ropes. Her eyes went wide as she watched the coin rolling but falling short of her reach. Grady looked at Michael, Katie, and Melissa. They all nodded their heads. Grady walked over to the little girl

and took her by the hand and led her up onto the stage. He brought the microphone down to her level.

“Hi there, do you have a name?” Grady asked

The little girl shook her head up and down but didn’t say anything.

“Can you tell me your name?” Grady asked.

“Cindy, my name is Cindy,” the little girl replied.

“Hi, Cindy! Do you know who I am?” Grady asked.

“Yes, sir, you’re the man with all the gold,” she answered.

Everyone laughed.

“How old are you, Cindy?” Grady asked her.

“Five, but I’ll be six some day,” the little girl answered.

“Cindy, do you know what that is?” he asked as he pointed to the pile of gold coins on the stage.

“Yes, sir, that’s gold. Is it real?” she asked.

“Yes, Cindy, it’s real. Would you like to touch it?” he asked.

The little girl just shook her head.

“Go ahead. It won’t hurt you,” Grady told her.

Cindy reached down and picked up one of the precious coins. The reflection of the Georgia sun reflected up onto her face.

“Well, what do you think, Cindy?” Grady asked.

“It’s beautiful,” the little girl answered.

Katie walked over and knelt down next to the little girl.

“Hi, Cindy! Do you know who I am?” Katie asked the little girl, that was busy looking at the coin in her hand.

“Yes, you’re the real pretty lady that my big brother likes,” she answered.

“Oh really? So your brother thinks I’m pretty, does he?” Katie asked the little girl.

“Yes, I think he wants to marry you or something, but Pa told him you’re too old for him,” Cindy answered.

“Too old? How old is your brother?” Katie asked.

“Ten,” Cindy told her. The entire crowd was laughing.

“Okay, I guess your pa was right. But, Cindy, you said that coin was pretty. Would you like to know what I think is pretty?” she asked.

“Yes,” the little girl answered.

“You and the way that your eyes lit up when my daddy told you to pick up that coin. What would you do with that much gold if I were to say give it to you?” Katie asked.

“I’d give it to my pa,” she told Katie.

“And why would you give it to your pa, Cindy?” Katie asked.

“Because he needs it to feed us. Mom got called to heaven, and now it’s just Pa and us little ones,” the little girl told Katie, with her eyes never leaving the coin in her hand.

“What would you say if I told you that my ma was in heaven too?” Katie told the little girl.

The little girl just looked up at her with the biggest eyes that Katie had ever seen.

“Really? Is she an angel like my ma is?” Cindy asked.

“I think so. All mothers are angels, aren’t they?” Katie asked.

“I think so,” Cindy answered.

“How many brothers and sisters do you have, Cindy?” Katie asked, not really wanting to know the answer.

“There’s four of us, not counting Pa,” the little girl told her.

“Where is your pa, Cindy?” Grady asked.

Cindy pointed to a tall man standing where Cindy once stood. At his side were three young children.

“Sir, would you please walk over to the back of the stage so I might speak with you please?” Grady asked. The man started walking to where Grady had pointed.

“Cindy, do you know whose gold this is?” Katie asked.

“Yes, it’s yours. You found it,” the little girl told her.

“Yes, we did find it, but it’s not mine. It belongs to the people of the South. And guess what, Cindy?” Katie asked the little girl.

“What?” the sweet little girl replied.

“I don’t think the people of the South will miss just one little piece of gold, do you?” Katie asked.

“Miss? Do you mean—” the little girl’s voice stopped.

“Yes, Cindy, that little piece of gold that you hold in your hand is yours. You may keep it, okay? But it’s yours. You don’t have to give to anyone not even your pa if you don’t want to. I think your pa is talking to my pa, and everything will be a little easier for you from now on. Okay?” Katie told the little girl.

The eyes of that little girl filled with tears as she turned to give Katie the biggest hug she could give. “Oh, thank you, thank you!” the little girl cried as she hugged Katie, never losing sight of that beautiful gold coin that she held in her hand.

The entire crowd went wild. It was the best feeling in the world for everyone.

In all, there were 372 wooden boxes pulled from the vault. Three hundred and twenty of them were filled with the double-eagle gold coins while the other fifty-two of them contained some very rare solid silver coins, bearing the insignia of the Confederacy. These hadn’t been seen since the start of the war, making the silver coins worth just as much as the gold coins and maybe even more.

Under the tightest security possible, everyone was allowed to walk by single file and touch and examine one of each of the valuable coins. The rest of the coins remained under some very tight security. The actual value of the treasure wouldn't be known for sometime. There was counting to do of course, and the metals had to be tested for the actual mineral content. If in fact every coin was proved to be 100 percent pure, then the value would skyrocket.

# The Best-Laid Plans of Mice and Men

Michael could sense the change. Something about Katie was different. That very moment that she had given that little girl that little gold coin, Michael knew. Whatever feeling he had for her before were all suddenly different. He saw her in a way that he had never seen her before. She was both glamorous and very appealing. She wore a very Civil War era dress that the ladies of the South had worn back then. The top of the dress was very tight against her body but not enough as to hide what hid underneath. It was open around the neck but just a little. It encased her, catching every curvature of her figure. At the waist, it hugged her, then cascading down and out, the gown flowed to the ground. There had never been a better example of a true southern belle, at least as far as Michael was concerned. It was done in very fine white silk, bordered in soft satin in a very elegant shade of pink. White and pink lace accented the dress, with a large pink satin ribbon or belt wrapping around her narrow waist while finishing off in a very large bow in the small of her back. The entire picture was topped off with a large brim hat that was slightly tilted toward the front and created the picture-perfect definition of the word *glamorous*.

And while Michael had always been attracted to her in ways that he was finding harder to control, right now, he found himself losing that control. He wanted her in a way that he had never wanted her before. Just watching her parade herself across that stage kneeling down to speak to that little girl made him want her just that much more.

And as he tried to maintain some form of dignity, he found himself grabbing her in his arms, lowering her to that wooden stage and taking her as his own right there in front of everyone. Well, in his mind, he could see that. Not that he could ever bring himself to do that, but he was thinking about it all the same. Finally, he couldn't hold it in any longer. Visions of her and him entangled in a lover's knot was just too much for him or any man to bear.

Katie had just started talking to some guys about the thrill of the hunt and how it felt when they had actually found the gold. Michael knew this because he stood there and listened to them talking as he gathered up his nerve.

“Katie my dear, may I have a word with you please?” he asked.

“Sure! One second, hon.” she answered.

“No, I need to talk to you now. Something has come up,” he told her.

“Okay, one second. I’ll be right with you,” she told him as she went back to her conversation with the two gentlemen.

“Katie, I must insist that I talk with you right now,” he told her. “Gentlemen would you excuse us please?” he asked as he pulled her away.

“Michael, that was very rude. Those guys were—” she started to say as Michael cut her words off.

“It’s time, honey,” he told her.

“What do you mean it’s time? What in the world are you talking about?” she asked.

“Katie, shut up and listen,” he told her as her eyes got bigger than he had thought possible.

“Don’t tell me to shut up,” she told him.

“Listen to what I’m saying, sweetheart. It’s time,” he told her.

“There you go with this it’s time crap again. Michael, are you okay?” she asked.

“Jesus, Katie, do I have to spell it out for you? It’s time. You know, like the right time, our time,” he explained to her.

“Michael, why don’t you just spit it out? What are you talking about?” she asked.

Finally, he leaned over and whispered into her ear. The smile that grew on her face was unmistakable.

“Really? Like right now, here?” she said.

“Well, not right here, but, yes, I mean now,” he told her.

She grabbed him by the hand and started running toward the house. “Well, come on, before you change your mind,” she told him.

“Okay, but not in your daddy’s house. Pick another spot,” he said.

“Okay fine, how’s the barn? We can do it in the hayloft,” she told him.

“That would be fine,” he said.

The two of them tried to quietly slip away off into the barn. And much to their surprise, nobody tried to stop them. Michael allowed Katie to go up the ladder that led up to the loft first. He followed close behind her. Now, it wasn’t done on purpose, but you have to remember that Katie was wearing this huge dress. Michael had a perfect view at Katie’s backside as he climbed the ladder behind her.

Michael looked down for just a second or two, and as he did, Katie stopped climbing the ladder. As he turned his attention back to the climb, he turned to look up at Katie again. But since she had stopped climbing and he hadn’t, he soon found himself going right up Katie’s dress, his face pressing against her ass.

“Michael, what in the world are you doing? Boy, when you said it was time, you wasn’t kidding, were ya?” she asked.

“That wasn’t my fault. You stopped,” he told her.

“Yeah right, but I’d like to see you climb a ladder in a dress like this. It ain’t as easy as it looks. Trust me, it ain’t,” she said.

“Well, it looks pretty nice from down here, I’ll tell ya. Would you please hurry up before someone comes in?”

“Well, I can’t. My foot is on my dress. I can’t move,” she told him.

“Here, let me see if I can’t get it loose,” he said. “There you go. Now move your foot over a bit.”

But as she did, she accidentally kicked him in the face, making him lose his grip and sending him falling backward onto a large pile of hay at the base of the ladder.

“Got it!” she proclaimed as she pulled herself onto the loft. Looking back down the ladder, she saw Michael sprawled out and half buried in the pile of hay.

“Michael, quit your goofing off and get up here. What in the world are you doing down there?” she asked.

“Just taking a break. Is it safe to come up there now?” he asked.

“Well, of course it is. That’s a stupid question. Git your butt up here!” she told him.

“I never knew having sex could be so dangerous,” he said.

“What did you say? Damn it, Michael! I’m a lady in waitin’, and you’re down there takin’ a break. You menfolk are hard to understand. I swear to God ya are,” she told him.

“You think us menfolk are hard to understand. You should try figurin’ out what a lady is thinking. That will screw ya up fer sure,” he replied as he climbed the ladder and crawled up into the loft into Katie’s waiting arms. The two of them fell backward, sinking into what most people would simply call hay. But Katie and Mike would soon call utterly fantastic. Or so they thought.

Everything was going great except for one little problem. No, it was actually a big problem, a really big problem.

As soon as Katie fell onto her back, the wire cage contraction called a loop skirt that gave her dress its shape opened up, well, like a parachute. And no matter what they tried to do, the damn thing was still in the way. And when they tried flipping it upward, Michael couldn’t see Katie’s face. And that was totally unacceptable.

“Honey, this just ain’t going to work,” he told her.

“Well, it’s all part of the outfit. This is what the ladies wore back then,” she explained.

“Well, it’s no wonder why there wasn’t that many babies back then. You had to be a contortionist to do anything with a woman while she wore one of these damn things. Can you take it off?” he asked.

“Here in the hayloft of my daddy’s barn? I’d have to get totally undressed to get this thing off,” she told him.

“Having you totally naked works for me ’cause as I see it, this ain’t going to happen here, not while you’re in that damn thing,” he said.

“How about we go back to the party, then I’ll go change, and then we can try again?” she asked.

“Takes all of the excitement out of it. Might end up with a wet fuse on a stick of dynamite,” he explained.

“Sorry about that, but I’m pretty sure that I can relight your wet fuse if you know what I mean,” she boasted.

“Well, we’ll see about that. But we do have another minor problem,” he told her.

“And what might that be?” she asked.

“Just how do you plan on climbing down a ladder with that thing on. You can’t see your feet. On the way up, it wasn’t a problem since you didn’t need to watch your feet. But on the way down, you sure will, especially the first couple of steps,” he explained to her.

“I see what you’re talking about. I guess that you’ll just have to help me,” she told him.

“And how do I do that, may I ask?” he said.

“Well, you’ll just have to guide my feet onto the struts of the ladder,” she explained.

“And in order to do that, I’ll have to have myself halfway up under your dress,” he told her.

“Well, I didn’t hear you complain about it last time,” she proclaimed.

“Who said that I was complaining about it this time?” he asked.

“Ha ha, very funny! Let’s do this,” she told him.

So Mike started down the ladder first. Katie laid down on her stomach and slowly proceeded to inch her way backward off of the loft.

“Michael, ya best not let me fall!” she yelled.

“Well, if ya do fall, I’ll break your fall,” he told her.

“Great, you can break my fall, and I’ll break my foolish neck,” she told him.

“Okay, just relax. I got your right foot. Now, just relax, and I’ll guide it over to the ladder,” he told her.

Katie felt his hand guiding her foot. She felt it as it passed something that she thought was the ladder. So she put her weight onto that foot and started to bring the other foot over.

“Katie, that ain’t the ladder. That’s my shoulder,” he told her just about the time her other foot found his other shoulder.

“Ooopppps! Sorry, hon, but I can ride down just like this if you can support me. Just a few steps, and I’ll be able to reach the ladder easier,” she told him.

“Okay but lift up your foot. This is mighty painful,” he told her.

“What in the world are you doing down there?” she asked.

“I’m taking your shoes off. If you have to stand on my shoulders, the shoes have to come off,” he told her.

“There ya go taking off my shoes again,” she said jokingly as Mike slipped off both of her shoes and threw them down to the ground.

“Aw hell, don’t move. My hair is caught in your cage thingamajig,” Mike told her.

Outside of the barn, Rick and Melissa were headed to do what Katie and Mike had hoped to do. But as they slid the door open, Melissa looked at Rick.

“Do you hear voices?” she asked him in a slight whisper.

“Yeah, but who is it?” he asked.

The two of them silently snuck into the barn. And there before them was Mike and Katie. Mike had his head up under Katie’s dress, and she

appeared to be standing on his shoulders?

“Katie, quit moving. You’re going to rip it out by the roots, and it might not grow back,” Mike told her.

“I’m trying. I guess doing it this way was a bad idea. I’m sorry,” she said.

Melissa looked at Rick. “Can you do it in that position?” she asked.

“Not me, but apparently your brother is very talented or gifted, I would say,” Rick replied.

“Indeed?” Melissa answered back.

“Is it out yet? I’m losing my balance,” Katie told Mike.

“Almost, there must be at least a couple inches that are still caught in your thing here, and it won’t let go!” Mike yelled back up to her.

“He’s stuck in her thing?” Rick whispered.

“I guess,” she told him. “Hey, you two, what in the hell are you doing?” she yelled.

Katie was startled to the point that her feet slipped off to the front of Mike’s shoulders, and she came crashing down onto his shoulders. “OOOPPPSSS!” Katie yelled. The metal frame of the hoop skirt came crashing down into Mike’s head. Without thinking about it, she wrapped her arms around Mike’s head, forcing the metal frame of the hoop skirt to dig into his face, causing him to lose his grip. And once again, Mike fell backward towards that large pile of hay, but this time, Katie was on his shoulders squeezing his head and there was loop skirt. They both landed in the soft cushion of hay.

Melissa and Rick started laughing. So much in fact that their ribs hurt. Katie and Mike just lay there, not saying a thing.

“Hey, you two, what in the world were you doing? Michael, you should be ashamed of yourself sticking your head up Katie’s dress like that. I mean really, if you wanted to see her underwear, she probably would have shown them to ya. Had you asked her nicely, that is,” Melissa said with a hint of laughter.

Mike opened his eyes and glanced over toward his sister. He really couldn't see her with all the hay.

"Melissa, you had better run 'cause as soon as I make sure Katie is all right I'm going . . ."

Melissa didn't stick around to hear the rest of it. And neither did Rick. They were gone.

"Katie, are you okay?" Mike asked.

Katie started laughing. "She's right! We must have looked pretty silly. God, I'm glad Daddy didn't walk in. He would still be laughing until Christmas time," she told him.

"Yeah, I guess it was pretty silly looking. But you're okay? Right?" he asked her.

"Oh, I'm fine. My hat will never be the same, but I'm fine. Oh my gosh, that was funny!" she told him.

Mike stood up and helped Katie to her feet. Then he started laughing.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Your hat, it's flat on one side," he told her.

"Well, I guess you'll just have to buy me a new one then," she said.

"For as funny as you look right now, I might just buy you two of them," he told her.

"Well, you should see your face. You have the indentation of the loop skirt across your face," she said laughing.

"Well, if it had been made out of chicken wire, then it would be worse. But I'll get you back, Katie Windslow. You just wait and see if I don't," he told her

"Oh really? Why wait? Here's a little something from me to you," she told him as she reached down and threw a large handful of hay at him.

"Right back at ya, sweetheart!" he yelled as he scooped up two large handfuls of straw and threw them at her. Hay was flying everywhere, scoop

after scoop, handful after handful, but they didn't care.

This went on for about five minutes or so. Then they hugged each other and laughed. Then hand in hand, with straw all over them, they walked from the barn. And for some reason, everyone was clapping and cheering for them.

Even Grady of all people.

It seems that Melissa and Rick had told everyone that they were having a straw fight, and Katie was winning. They knew better than to tell everyone the truth, especially since neither of them knew exactly what the truth was.

Apparently, the best-laid plans of mice and men are best left to the experts. Or so it would seem anyways.

# The Dream of Every Woman

Katie headed straight to the house to change her clothes and lose that damn hoop skirt. As she had just finished changing, Melissa knocked on her door. As Katie opened it, she found a very excited Melissa before her.

"I know something that you don't know," Melissa said as she walked past Katie.

"Really? I guess that would explain the grin on your face," Katie told her.

"Yeah, maybe, but just wait until I tell ya what I know, and we'll see if you ain't smiling too," Melissa responded.

"So tell me already," Katie told her.

"Okay. Well, I was standing over behind Rick, Mike, and your dad, and I overheard Rick say that it's about time to ask her to marry him," Melissa said.

"So you think Rick is going to pop the question? That's great! I'm so happy for ya. Rick is a really nice guy," Katie told her.

"Well, I might be reading more into it than I should, but that's the feeling that I got," Melissa responded.

"Well, if he does, I couldn't be any happier for you," Katie answered back.

"Thanks, Katie! You're a sweetheart. You know what? I've only known you for a few days, but it feels like we've been best friends forever. And if Rick does ask me, would you like to be my maid of honor?" Melissa asked. "I can't think of anyone else that I'd rather have than my newest friend."

"Melissa, from the day that you stepped off of that train, you have treated me just like a sister. And you'll never know just how much that means to me. So of course, I'll be you're maid of honor. Without question, I would consider it an honor. But if your brother ever asks me, you have to agree to be mine as well. Okay?" Katie told her.

“That sounds like a deal. But I do have one simple little question for ya. What in the hell were you doing in the barn?” Melissa asked. “That, my dear Katie, had to be the funniest thing that I have ever seen.”

Katie just threw her a devilish smile.

“You didn’t?” Melissa asked.

“No, we didn’t, but we would have if it hadn’t been for that stupid hoop skirt,” Katie told her.

“Oh, I see. So my brother had his head up your dress for what reason?” she asked with a very sinister grin.

“That will remain our little secret, but you and Rick should try it sometime. It’s great,” Katie replied.

“Well, maybe later, you’ll find the time to explain it to me in more detail. But right now, I need to go freshen up just in case he does ask me,” Melissa told her.

“Well, I’ll be praying for ya, okay?” Katie told her.

“You do that. I’ve got to go. I’ll see you outside,” Melissa said as she left the room.

Katie went back to brushing her hair. “Oh, look, more straw,” she said to herself as she pulled it from her brush. Then she remembered something that she had promised Michael. As she pulled her red dress from the closet, she knew that he would like it, along with all of the other guys as well. So she changed into it and added some final touches and went outside.

As Katie stepped out from the house, the bright afternoon sun had fallen from the sky. In its place was a full moon, shining its romantic light down on the earth or at least on to Mattersonville, Georgia. Katie was thinking back to what had just happened in the barn and all. Maybe it was all the excitement of finally uncoverin’ the treasure or her and Michael’s little romp in the hay, or attempted romp anyways. But there was something in the air, something that told her that there was still more yet to come.

The fireworks were supposed to be starting anytime, and in fact, they were late. They should have started at dusk, but why hadn’t they started

yet? She would have to go see what the delay was.

As she walked past the stage, Mike asked her to join him next to the microphone. She was curious, but she agreed all the same.

“Okay, Michael, you’ve got me up here on the stage again. I was going to find out why the fireworks hadn’t started yet,” she told him. She was surprised when they were joined by Melissa, Rick, and her daddy.

“Katie, we need to talk,” Michael told her.

“Need to talk? Talk about what?” she asked

“Katie sweetheart, you know that I would never do anything to hurt you, right?” he asked.

Katie just looked at him in a very questionable stare. “Yeah, but where are you going with this, Michael?” she asked.

“Well, I’ve been thinking’, and I don’t want to hurt you, but I think we need to end this little courtship of ours,” he told her without looking at her in the eye.

“Excuse me, you want to break up our little courtship? In front of all these people? I can’t believe you’re doing this to me, Michael. I love you. And I thought you loved me,” she told him as the tears started flowing down her cheeks.

“But I do love you, and I always will. But I just don’t want to be your boyfriend anymore. And if that hurts you, Katie, I’m sorry. But I feel that I must follow my heart here,” he said as he held her hand and slowly wiped away her tears with his fingers.

“Fine, if you want to break up with me, I understand. Wait a second. Like hell, I understand. I don’t understand anything. Why now, Michael? Why in front of all these people? Just tell me that, Michael. Tell me why!” she asked.

“Witness,” he told her.

“Witness for what?” she asked.

Michael turned to Grady. “Grady, I’d like to have your daughter’s hand in marriage. Do I have your approval, sir?” he asked.

“Son, it would be an honor to have such a fine gentleman as yourself as my son-in-law, so my answer would be yes,” Grady told him as Katie stood there in total disbelief.

Michael turned back toward Katie. Dropping down onto one knee, he slid a ring on to her finger. “Katie Windslow, will you marry me ?” he asked.

Katie just stood there. And for once on her life, she was utterly speechless. As she glanced up at the crowd, she noticed everyone was staring at her. She saw Melissa smiling at her as she turned her attention back to Michael.

“Well, Katie? I’m waiting, and they’re all waiting,” Mike said as he pointed toward the crowd.

“Yes! Oh my god, yes!” she said as he stood taking her into his arms and locking his lips on to hers. And behind them . . . fireworks, a lot of fireworks bursting high up in the Georgia night sky. The entire crowd erupted in a hail of applause.

“I love you, Michael, but that was mean telling me that you didn’t want to be my boyfriend anymore,” she spoke into his ear.

Mike pulled his body away from hers. “But I don’t want to be your boyfriend anymore. I want to be your husband. And I want you to be my wife. I want to wake up every day and see you sleeping next to me. I want to hold you and warm you when you’re cold and take care of you when you’re sick. I want to grow old together and live our final years in just as much love as I feel for you right now. So if I have to stop being your boyfriend to do all of that and more, then I will. Just because I love you so much, soon-to-be Mrs. Katie Gibbes,” he told her.

“Katie Gibbes? Now that might take a little getting used to. But as far as your kisses go, I’m still studying. So kiss me,” she told him as they kissed again. Then she stopped. With her lips still pressed against his, she said, “The fireworks were a nice touch.”

“I thought that you would enjoy that part. But you were right. That red dress looks great on you, and I haven’t looked at your feet once. But for right now, let’s get back to this part,” he said as he pulled her into him and kissed her harder. After a very hard and passionate kiss, each of them pulled away slowly. “Katie, there’s only one thing that I can think of that would make me any happier than I am right now,” Michael told her.

As Katie wiped her eyes, she asked, “And what would that be, if I dare ask?”

“Well, while our wedding will be a very big event, we need to make it a tad bigger,” he told her.

“And how would you do that?” she asked.

Michael turned to look at Rick as he dropped to one knee in front of Melissa. “Melissa, we’ve been friends ever since we were kids. We’ve even dated a few times, but I think it’s time that we made it official. So would you marry me and make me the happiest man in the world?” he asked her.

While Melissa might have been expecting it, a double wedding she wasn’t. She just stared at him as she tried to control herself. Finally, she found the right words as she stared up at him. “Rick, I’d love to marry you, but before I start crying like a little baby, I have to say yes,” she told him as she fell into his waiting arms.

The crowd went wild. The two girls just looked at each other. Then they ran toward each other and fell into a very heartfelt embrace.

“Ladies, would you care to dance?” Michael asked them.

“Sure, but we haven’t any music,” Katie told him.

“You’re Katie Windslow. Just tell them that you want some music,” he told her as he put the microphone in front of her.

“Excuse me, can we get some music please? We want to dance,” he said into the microphone.

And like magic, from behind the stage, the band started playing. And they were playing their song, the same song Michael had played for her for that first time in the soda shop—“Unforgettable.”

“Michael, I do declare you’re just full of surprises today, ain’t ya?” she told him as they danced across the stage.

“No, just full of love. For you,” he told her.

And the four newly proclaimed lovers started dancing the first dance of the rest of their lives.

On the other side of the stage, Grady was watching as the four of them danced. He was truly happy for all of them. But he noticed a little boy staring at them too and almost as hard as he was.

“How ya doing, son?” Grady asked.

“Oh, hi, Grady, or Mr. Windslow,” the boy answered.

“My friends call me Grady, so you can too. So you know who I am, do you?” he asked the little boy.

“Yes, sir, she’s your daughter,” the boy answered as he pointed at Katie.

“Yep, that’s my little girl all right all grown up. Hey, I bet you’re Cindy’s brother, ain’t ya?” Grady asked.

“Yes, sir. Sir, you’re daughter, she’s going to marry that guy, isn’t she?” he asked.

“Yes, son, I’m sorry, but I think she will do just that. You really like my daughter, don’t ya?” he asked.

“Yes, sir, she’s just about the prettiest thing that I ever saw. And I’ll tell ya a secret, that is if you give yer word that you won’t tell her what I’d said,” the boy said.

“Oh, I give you my word. I won’t tell Katie a single word of what you tell me. Okay?” Grady promised the little boy.

“Well, I walked by her, and oh my world, she smelled as good as a zillion freshly picked flowers,” the little boy told him.

“Are you sure you’re only twelve?” Grady asked.

“Yes, sir, twelve years old I am,” the boy answered.

“Well, son, if you keep talking like that, you’ll have girls fallin’ all over themselves just to be wit’ ya. Where did you learn to talk like that?” Grady asked.

“Well, I read a lot, and I go to school . . . when I can,” he answered.

“Well, you stay in school every day now. But now back to Katie. Would you like to dance with her, son? Would you like to hold her in your arms and slow dance with her?” Grady asked.

“Yes, sir, Mr.—I mean, Grady. I would die to dance just one dance with her,” the boy explained.

“Okay, this is what you do when this song ends, okay?” Grady explained how to break into someone else’s dance with a beautiful woman. The little boy said that he understood.

“But if anyone tries to break in on your dancing with her, you just tell them this,” Grady told the little boy as he whispered into his ear.

“Oh no, I’ll get in trouble if I say that,” the boy told Grady.

“You’re right, you would indeed, but just this one time, it will be okay. You just tell them that Grady said it would be okay.”

“Are you sure I ain’t going to git a whipping ’cause Pa don’t like it when I back talk?” the little boy asked. “Especially to an adult.”

“Yes, I’m sure, but you can only do it this one time, okay?” Grady asked.

“Well, okay, but just this once ’cause Pa’s whipping, they hurt real bad,” the little boy explained.

“Trust me, no whippings. Okay, just wait for the music to stop and then do what I told ya, okay?” Grady asked the boy. The little boy just shook his head. He understood what Grady meant.

Grady went over to the band and requested a really slow ballad to be played next. The band agreed.

As the music stopped, Mike and Katie pulled themselves away from each other’s embrace. Then Katie felt a little tug on her dress. She turned to

see this little boy looking up at her.

“Yes, sir, what can I do for you?” Katie asked.

“Miss, would you mind very much if I cut in please? This next dance is ours,” the boy asked.

Katie was in total shock. “I’m sorry, Michael, but this dance belongs to him,” she said as she turned back to the little boy. “So what’s your name?” Katie asked.

“Bobby. You know my sister Cindy,” he explained to her.

“You’re the one that thinks I’m pretty, right?” she asked.

“No, I know you’re pretty. Can we dance please?” he asked her.

“Well, Bobby, I’d love to, dear, but I don’t hear any music,” she told him.

“Details, details, details,” he said as he led Katie by the hand out to the middle of the stage. Katie really had no clue as to what this little boy was up to, but still she played along. Once they were in the center of the stage, Bobby clapped his hands together one time, and the band started playing.

“Well I be,” Katie started to say as Bobby pulled her into him, and they danced. Katie was really surprised to see just how well the little boy could dance. She was impressed. With his hand pressed firmly on to her waist, they danced. She half waited for his hand to drop to her backside as all of the other boys had done when they had danced with her. But not Bobby, he was a true gentleman. Right up to the end of their dance anyway. As the music ended, Katie looked at Bobby.

“Sir, that was the nicest dance that I think I have ever danced. Thank you so much,” she told him.

“Well, there’s more if you care to dance another one with me,” the little said.

Katie just looked down at the little boy. Oh, he was a charmer indeed.

“Bobby, I would love to dance another dance with you,” she told him.

But just then, Grady walked up and asked for the next dance. Bobby just looked at him.

“Buzz off, old man. The lady is with me,” Bobby told Grady.

Katie was in total shock. “Bobby!” she yelled at him. Then she noticed that her dad was laughing. She looked down at Bobby and then back at her dad. “You put him up to that, didn’t ya?” she asked him.

“Relax, Katie, you should have seen the look on your face. It was worth it,” her dad told her.

“He made me say it. I didn’t want to, with you being a lady and all,” Bobby said.

“Well, I forgive you, Bobby, but as for you, Daddy dear, that was mean,” she told him.

“Maybe so, but that look on your face, if only for a second, was priceless, dear. So you two can go on dancing, and I’ll leave you alone, but that was funny as hell,” Grady said as he turned and walked away.

Katie looked down at Bobby. “Okay, now you have to promise me that you’ll never be rude like that again. Okay?” she told Bobby.

“Okay, I promise. I’m sorry if I made you not like me anymore,” he said.

“I never said that I didn’t like you. I just don’t like it when sweet, charming little boys like you are rude. That’s not the way to win a girl’s heart. You know that, don’t you?” she asked.

“Yeah, I do, and I tried to tell your daddy, but he said it would be okay, just this once,” he explained.

“Well, I believe you. So where were we?” she asked.

Bobby clapped his hands again, and the music started again as did their second of many dances.

# Weasels and Riffraff

Grady was feeling pretty darn good about himself right about now. What he and his daughter, Katie, had done was truly rewarding in a very peaceful sort of way. And of course, there was Mike and Melissa to thank as well. After all, they too had added a lot to this adventure. Yes, sir, Grady was about as peaceful as any man could be on the inside. And there was nothing that was going to ruin his day.

However, nothing wasn't something—it was someone. And that someone was named Mr. Walter Mitchell. Grady was perched against a white railed fence that ran from the far side of the house and out to the gate. He had watched this weird little man walking around, talking with this or that person, and well, that's all he was doing, which didn't really bother Grady, not at all. After all, there were a great number of people here, but this man was, well, weird. And that was the only word that Grady could come up with that fit what he saw in this man. *Weird*.

Grady guessed that this weird little man stood maybe five foot five or maybe a little less. But it appeared that he was as big around as he was tall. A fat little man, this Walter Mitchell was. And the brown derby hat that he wore just added to his weird little shape. When Grady noticed that the weird little man was headed in his direction, Grady thought, *Aw hell, what does little man want from me?*

"Sir, I hate to bother you, but—" Grady cut him off in mid sentence.

"Then don't," Grady said to the man.

"Don't what?" the little man asked.

"Bother me. If ya hate to do something, then just don't do it," Grady told him.

"Sir, that was a figure of speech. But could you help me. I need to find this guy called Grady Windslow. But I can't seem to locate him, so if you could point him out to me, I'll leave you to finish whatever it was that you were doing, sir," the little man replied.

“Grady, Grady Windslow? What in the world would you want to find him fer?” Grady asked.

“Well, that, sir, is none of your concern. However, if you need to know, I’m a reporter for the *American Free Press*, and I’d like to interview him for the paper. So if you would be so kind and just point him out to me,” the little man told Grady.

“*American Free Press*? Never heard of it. And I’m pretty certain that Grady wouldn’t be interested in talking with a reporter from a paper that he doesn’t know,” Grady told him.

“Well, sir, I’ll have you know that my paper, or the paper that I work for, is in fact the largest paper in the world, sir, so if you could just point him out to me, I’ll be on my way,” the little man barked back. But how much of this hogwashed story did he expect anyone to buy was anyone’s guess.

“Largest paper in the world, you say? Hmmmm, okay I’ll bite. Pull yourself up a fence post, and I’ll talk with ya. What did you say your name was again?” Grady asked.

“My name, my dear sir, is Mr. Walter Mitchell. But why in the world would I want to talk to a worn-out old geezer like you. Especially when there’s this adventure-seeking icon like Grady Windslow somewhere around here,” the weird little man told Grady.

Grady’s temper was soaring. “Okay, I’ll point him out to ya. But would you prefer before or after?” Grady asked.

“Before or after what? May I ask?” the little man asked.

“Before or after I plant my boot across the seat of your trousers!” Grady told him.

“Well, I will not stand here and be threatened any longer. Apparently, Mr. Windslow will allow any type of riffraff onto his property. Good day to you, sir,” the little man said as he turned to leave.

“Yep, but you’re mistaken about one thing you know?” Grady told him.

The man turned to face Grady. “And what would that be?” he asked.

“Well, actually, Mr. Windslow has allowed anyone and everyone onto this nice little piece of land. Everyone, that is except for rude, obnoxious, inconsiderate little weasels like you,” Grady told him.

“That’s exactly my point. Again, good day to you, sir. I will continue my search for Mr. Windslow elsewhere,” he said as he turned again to leave.

“Fine, you do that, but when you do find Grady, you tell him that you’re an idiot. And tell him that I said so,” Grady told him.

“I certainly will not. However, I will tell him how rude his guests are. All of these vermin acting like stupid soldiers. Guests like you, sir, ruin everything. And may I tell him your name?” he asked.

“Sure can,” Grady told him.

“Sir, I cannot tell Mr. Windslow your name if I don’t know your name now, can I?” he asked.

“Guess not,” Grady told him, but inside, Grady wanted to brand his name into the man’s fat butt. But he couldn’t.

“Well, sir, I can see that not only are you rude, but you’re also a coward,” the man told him as he turned and walked away.

*A coward? Did that fat little weasel just call me a coward? I should go beat his ass. But he’ll get his—just wait for it. Revenge would be sweet. And it will be all mine,* Grady said to himself.

About a half hour later, Grady had just finished talking with Katie. He had told her about the conversation that he had with this weird little man. Katie was in shock.

“He called you a coward? And an old geezer too. And you didn’t hit the son of a bitch. Daddy, are you getting soft?” she asked.

“Soft? No. But I do have something else that will get this little weasel his just desserts. This is what I want you to do,” he told Katie what to do, and again that devilish smile appeared across her face.

“Got it. When do I do this?” she asked.

“The sooner the better,” Grady told her.

And just like clockwork Katie was doing as her daddy had asked. She climbed up on the stage and stood before the microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, can I please have your undivided attention please?” she asked. Everyone or mostly everyone turned and approached the stage.

“Thank you all again for coming today, but we have a special announcement to make. So could I please have a Mr. Walter Mitchell up on the stage please? A Walter Mitchell, could you please come up on the stage?” Katie said through the public address system. And she waited. But she didn’t need to wait that long, not at all.

“I’m Walter Mitchell. Did you ask for me?” the little man said as he made his way through the crowd.

Katie almost started to laugh. Her daddy’s description of this weird little man was right on the money. He was indeed weird looking.

“Well, if you’re the Walter Mitchell that’s with the *Free American Press*, then you’re the one that we want. Come on up here,” Katie told him.

Walter climbed the few short steps up to the stage and walked right up next to Katie.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to introduce you to Mr. Walter Mitchell,” Katie turned and looked at Walter. “This is your lucky day, Walter. Do you know who I am?” she asked.

“No, I can’t say that I do, miss,” Walter responded.

“Well, my name is Katie. Katie Windslow to be honest,” she told him.

“Grady’s daughter?” he asked.

“That’s right. Grady is my daddy. So, Walter, have you had a good time here today meeting all of these fine southern folk and seeing all of the Civil War stuff and eating all of this great food? So have you enjoyed yourself?” she asked.

“Not really, miss. I’ve been looking for yer dad,” he explained to her.

“Yeah, I know that’s why you’re up here, Walter, so you can meet my daddy. But tell me and these fine people about that old geezer that you ran into,” she told him.

“Well, he was rude and not very friendly,” he told her.

“Really? And you called him and his guests riffraff, I think was the word that you used. Well, Walter, do these people out here look like riffraff to you?” she asked.

“That’s not what I meant. I meant he was a riffraff, that old geezer fart of a man,” Walter was getting a little upset, having to defend what he had said before all of these southern folk.

“And you called him what else, Walter? Didn’t you call that old geezer a coward as well?” she asked.

“Well, he wouldn’t tell me his name when I told him that I was going to tell Mr. Windslow how he had treated me,” Walter told Katie, and everyone else that was in an earshot of the speakers.

“Well, Walter, I’m going to let you meet my daddy, so you can confront him about that old geezer and all of these people here that you call riffraff,” she told him. And with that, Grady walked out onto the stage, but he stayed well out of Walter’s sight.

“Walter I’d like you to meet my daddy, Grady Windslow,” Katie told him.

As Walter spun around to meet Grady for the very first time, he got the shock of his life.

“It’s . . . it’s you . . . you’re Grady Windslow? Oh my god!” the little man said as he looked Grady straight in the face.

“Yeah, that’s my name. But let’s talk about you for a second, shall we?” Grady asked.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know who you were,” the man said.

“That’s a good place to start. Everyone here would like you to know your answers to this. Why are you a babbling pimp squeak of a man that

apparently was never taught any manners and talks to people like you're better than anyone else? On top of being a liar," Grady asked.

"Sir, I am not a liar," the little man spoke back.

"Yes, you are. Let's talk about the *American Free Press*. You claimed it to be the world's largest paper. Well, if that was true, then why hasn't anyone ever heard of it? Why is it that your paper, and yes, I said your paper because you own it, only has a subscription of—well, let's say it's under a thousand?" Grady asked.

The little man looked at Grady with wonder in his eyes. There was no way for him to have known that. No way.

"Sir, I don't know where you got your information, but I assure you that you're mistaken," the little man told him.

"Mr. Mitchell, that gentleman standing next to my daughter is Aaron James. He's with the United States Treasury Department, and you'd be surprised what information can be turned up with a single phone call. So would like another chance at answering the question, sir?" Grady asked.

"Okay fine, it is my paper. But I only told you that in hopes of landing an interview. An interview from someone like you, well, it would have made our subscriptions soar," the little man confessed.

"Sir, let me let you in on a little secret. I would have given you an exclusive interview had you been honest with me and told me that you were an independent publisher trying to make your mark against the giant papers. That would have been the honest play, sir," Grady told him.

"I'm sorry . . . I should have been honest. But since we're talking about being honest, sir . . . why didn't you tell me that you were Grady Windslow?" the little man asked.

"Okay, that's fair. Why didn't you ask me? Before you started acting like a complete idiot. Calling everyone here riffraff and calling me a coward. Okay? Now it's my turn to ask a question. I was wondering about your suit. Is that imported? It looks rather expensive, is it?" Grady asked.

“Why, yes, it is. You have a good eye, sir. It’s imported from Italy,” the little man said with a sense of pride.

“I thought so. First rule, lose the suit. When you take a piece of shit and roll it into a little ball, it’s still a piece of shit, sir, even if you wrap it in an expensive Italian suit. And lose that ridiculous hat. It looks like a cherry on a ball of shit.

“And instead of running your mouth, you should try just running. You could stand to lose a few pounds, you out of shape piece of crap.

“You will find that if you treat people the way that you yourself would want to be treated, you’ll get a lot further in this world of ours.

“Second, all of these people here are not riffraff. They’re Americans, sir. Americans that are proud to be just that—Americans. And while they may indeed be dressed up like Confederate soldiers, it’s their pride that brought them here so they could be a part of something special like what happened here today. They also help us all to remember an important part of American’s past, sir. They represent what America is all about, sir, while you sole handedly represent the complete opposite, sir,” Grady said as he casually knocked the derby from the man’s head, sending it the floor of the stage about four feet in front of the man. “Now pick up your hat, sir before I stomp on it,” Grady told him.

As the man bent over to retrieve his hat, Grady firmly kicked him across the seat of his trousers, sending him forward toward the edge of the stage.

“One final word for you, sir. You have but ten seconds to remove yourself from my property, or I will unleash about five hundred pissed-off Confederate soldiers that would love to get hold of a Yankee reporter, sir. Now git your fat ass off of our stage and don’t ever let me see you around here again. And one thing more, you might want to read about your stupidity in the *Boston Herald*. Watch your subscription numbers now, you worthless piece of filth!” Grady told him as the entire crowd erupted in a hail of cheers as the little man ran from the property.

As Mr. Walter Mitchell ran or wobbled from the property, Aaron James walked up to where Grady was standing. “Excuse me, Grady, but you never

asked me to make any phone calls about that guy or his paper,” he told him.

“I know that. But apparently, he didn’t,” Grady replied.

“But how did you know—I mean, okay maybe his paper isn’t the largest paper in the world like he claimed, but how did you know the rest?” he asked.

“I didn’t. But I just knew that I was right. And sometimes the best way to go is to bluff your way through,” Grady explained.

“Well, remind me never to play poker with you, okay?” Aaron told him with a smile.

“Deal,” Grady responded as he slapped Aaron on the back of his shoulder as the two of them walked up toward the house.

“So what happens to the gold now?” Grady asked.

“Well, as soon as it’s done being loaded, it will be transported to a secret location until they can arrange the proper transportation to take it on to Washington. And before you ask, yes, it will be under the tightest security possible,” Aaron reassured him.

“Well, that was going to be my next question. But now I feel a lot better knowing that it’s protected. So what do you say we go rest ourselves on the porch and have a beer or two?” Grady asked.

“Sir, it would be an honor to share a beer with ya,” Aaron responded.

As they slowly made their way to the porch, they were very pleased to see the two couples sitting on the porch.

“Looks like we’ll be having some company with that beer,” Aaron told him.

“And some very good company at that,” Grady replied.

As the two men got closer to the porch, Grady knew that they were all making plans for their weddings.

“So what are the four of you conspiring to do now?” Grady asked.

“Nothing yet, but I have a question for you, Daddy. When did you first know that he was going to propose to me?” Katie asked.

“Do you want the very first time or the confirmed time?” Grady asked her.

“The very first time. When did you know that we would be getting married?” she asked.

“Well, let’s see now. Hmmm, okay, the very first time that I knew that the two of you were going to be married was the very first time that Michael here walked you home. But it wasn’t confirmed until we were up on that stage today. Okay?” Grady told her.

“See, Katie, you owe me an apology. Grady, she thought that you and I had this all set up beforehand,” Michael told him.

“Nope. Sorry, Katie, we didn’t have this all set up. But we did mention it loud enough for Melissa to hear. But that was all about her and Rick,” Grady confirmed.

“You knew that I heard you?” Melissa asked as she stared at Rick.

“On purpose. Grady didn’t know about it, that’s true. But Mike and I have been planning this for the last two days. And we figured that Katie was on to our little surprise, so to get her to drop her guard, we made sure that you heard us talking. We knew that you would run right to Katie and tell her what you heard. And you did, didn’t you?

“So Katie thought that I was going to ask you, but when Mike asked her, you probably thought that you hadn’t heard it right. So for a few minutes up there on stage, you must have been pretty disappointed. We weren’t trying to be mean or anything, but we had to keep the two of you off guard. The look on your faces, it was worth it, wasn’t it Mike?” Rick asked.

“Oh, without question, totally worth it,” Mike answered.

“The two of you played us against each other just to keep us off guard?” Katie asked in a tone that told everyone that she was really mad.

Only one time before had they heard Katie use that tone, and that was in the cave as she read something about her mother.

“Now, Katie, relax, we didn’t do it to hurt either of you ladies. Really!” Mike told her as he slowly tried to get out of her line of reach. He remembered what she had done to Susie. But it wasn’t working very well.

“Melissa isn’t just a friend. She’s like a sister that I never had. And I don’t take kindly to us being played against each other for any reason. You understand me, Michael? And you too, Rick. I don’t like it,” Katie told the two men standing before her.

Melissa walked up next to Katie. “Yeah, that goes for me too. Katie and I are not toys for your own personal amusement. We have feelings too. And if either of you want to push this issue, we can get really mean,” she told them.

“Ladies, ladies, relax. We’re sorry, okay? We weren’t thinking, okay?” Mike told the two pissed-off ladies before him. The ladies turned toward Rick and waited for him to apologize as well.

“Look, like Mike said, we weren’t thinking about your feelings, okay? We’re really sorry,” Rick told them.

Katie and Melissa just stared at each other. Then they busted out laughing.

“You guys should have seen the looks on your faces. I thought Rick was going to pee his pants or something,” Katie said between her laughter.

“Yeah, and you, my loving brother, I was waiting for you to stick your head up her dress again and kiss her ass. That was funny,” Melissa told him.

The two guys just looked at each other, and they knew that they had just been played.

“Okay, you got us. I thought that you were really mad at us. But you ladies got us back, fair and square,” Mike told them.

“Yeah, now that was planned. So when did you two ladies set that up?” Rick asked.

“Oh, about thirty seconds ago. I just knew that Katie wasn’t mad, so I knew where she was going, so I jumped on for the ride,” Melissa explained.

“And I knew that I was going to do that right when you said you should have seen your faces. Seems like I’ve heard that before, isn’t that right, Daddy?” Katie asked.

“Oh, you mean the Bobby thing? Yeah, I forgot about that,” Grady confessed.

“Can I say something here?” Aaron asked.

“Sure, Mr. James, feel free to jump right in here,” Katie responded.

“First off, congratulations to all four of you, but, ladies, that was very well done. And, guys, if I were you, I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes if you ever got these two ladies here really mad at you. It wouldn’t be that healthy,” he told them.

“Why, thank you, that was very nice. Did you hear that, guys, it wouldn’t be that healthy. Get the message there?” Katie asked.

“Yeah, yeah, we got it all right,” Rick answered her. Mike just shook his head.

“Now, Grady, didn’t you say something about a beer?” Aaron asked.

“After that, I might need something a little stronger,” Grady replied.

“Great, let’s see what you got?” Aaron told him as the two of them went into the house.

The four of them sat out on that porch until about two o’clock in the morning before one of them suggested that they did have to go to church in the morning. Most of the townspeople had already left and had gone home. A few of the soldiers were still sitting around their makeshift campfires, still swapping stories with whoever would listen. But for the most part, the Georgia air was peaceful, quiet, and surreal. There was a definite calm in the air.

# The Faith to Believe

Melissa looked simply ravishing in her Sunday dress as she and Michael walked through the front doors of Matterson House. Michael was all done up as well in his suit and tie. Grady had met them at the door and walked them to the kitchen so they could wait for Katie to come down.

“Grady, you don’t look that well this morning. Are you okay?” Melissa asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just having a few effects leftover from last night, is all,” Grady told her.

“Grady, you’ve got a hangover?” Michael asked.

“Well, it feels like something is hanging over somewhere, that’s for sure,” he replied.

“How long did you and Mr. James sit up drinking last night?” Melissa asked.

“I don’t know. What time is it?” he asked.

“It’s eight-thirty,” Mike answered.

“Oh God, about an hour or so ago. Do I look that bad? Really?” he asked.

“Yeah, you do really. You need to go to bed and sleep it off,” Melissa told him.

“What happened to Mr. James?” Michael asked.

“He’s on the couch. He thought that he could drink Grady Windslow under the table. It was a good fight, but I’m not too sure who won,” Grady told them.

“Well, if he passed out and you’re still awake, that makes you the winner then,” Mike explained.

“Well, if this is what a winner feels like, I think I’ll lose from now on, if you don’t mind,” he told them as he flopped down in the kitchen chair.

“That might be a pretty good idea. Here, let’s get you up to bed,” Mike told him as he helped him to get up from the chair. As the two men slowly made their way up the stairs, Katie was on her way down.

“What’s wrong with Daddy?” she asked.

“It seems that he had a little too much to drink last night,” Mike answered.

“Don’t lie, Michael. I had way too much to drink. You look pretty this morning, Katie, both of you,” he said in a very slurred voice.

“Thanks, Daddy, you get some rest. You look like you could use some,” she told him.

“I’ll get him up to his room, but you might want to throw a blanket over your guest on the couch,” Mike told her.

“Guest? Oh, Mr. James! I’ll check on him,” Katie responded.

Michael soon made his way back into the kitchen where the two ladies were waiting.

“You’ll have to excuse my daddy. He hasn’t drank since Mama died,” she explained.

“Katie, I or I should say, we, have the utmost respect for your father. And a little drinking now and again might do more good than harm,” Melissa told her.

“Yeah, I guess, but when Mama died, he drank for a whole week straight. He was really messed up. He really loved her. It tore him up when she died,” she explained.

“That’s understandable, but we can’t hold it against him,” Mike told her.

“I don’t, not at all. But I was really afraid that I might lose him as well. So to see him like that, it brings back a lot of bad memories, that’s all,” she explained her concerns.

“Well, that’s all they are—memories. That’s all,” Melissa told her.

“So are you ladies ready to go?” Michael asked.

“Sure, I think so,” Katie answered.

Michael walked them out to the car. The two ladies sat in the back as Michael slid in behind the wheel. As the car made its way through town, the two girls started to talk.

“We have a slight dilemma,” Katie told Melissa.

“I know, the maid of honor thing, right?” she replied.

“Exactly. I was thinking about asking Susie to be mine. What do you think about that?” Katie asked.

“Actually, I was thinking the same thing. I’ll have to clear it with Rick, but she used to be my best friend. And what she did to save you and your dad pretty much cleared the books as far as I’m concerned,” Melissa answered.

“Well, I have some personal business to do with her when I see her, so is it okay if I ask her, pending Rick’s approval of course?” Katie asked.

“Sure as long as she knows that it all depends on what Rick says. I think she’ll understand that,” Melissa answered.

“I think she’ll fully understand that too,” Katie replied.

“Do you mind if I ask you what kind of business you have to do with her?” Melissa asked.

“No, not at all. We’ve decided to give her the deed to her parent’s house. They’ll have enough problems having to watch her dad go to prison for killing my Uncle Jack. Giving them the house should make it a lot easier on them,” Katie explained.

“That’s just what I thought it would be about. You and your daddy are some really forgiving people. You two really inspire me, and I mean that in a good way,” Melissa answered.

“Well, we try to live life the best that we can. Doesn’t always work, but the Lord does watch over us, that’s for sure,” Katie answered.

“That he does for sure,” Melissa answered as Michael pulled the car into the parking lot of the church. Rick walked up to Melissa’s door and opened it.

“Hello, love, you look simply ravishing today,” Rick said as he took Melissa’s hand and helped her from the car.

“Good morning, Rick, you keep talking like that, and we’ll have to take another trip out to Katie’s barn without a hoop skirt,” she told him as she glanced over to see a smile across Katie’s face.

“Yeah, without a hoop skirt, trust me,” Katie answered. The two girls just laughed.

“Rick, can I have a word alone with you please?” Melissa asked.

“Sure. Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah, everything is fine. I just have a question for you, is all. It’s about our wedding,” she explained.

“Sure, we can walk over there and talk,” he told her as they started walking over to a large oak tree. When they were alone, Melissa explained about Susie being their maid of honor.

“Susie Barnes? And you and Katie are both in agreement with this choice of your maid of honor?” he asked.

“You have to understand one thing, Rick. Susie put everything that she ever had in jeopardy to save Katie and her dad. It took a lot of guts to do what she did. And like I told Katie, that single unselfish act pretty much cleared the books as far as I’m concerned. But out of respect for you, I need your permission before we ask her. What she did to you was totally wrong, so if you say no, we both will understand and respect your position,” Melissa explained.

“Melissa sweetheart, you know that I love you with all of my heart. And since we’re soon going to be husband and wife, I have to respect your position just as you’re respecting mind. So if having Susie Barnes as your maid of honor will make you happy, then I have no problem with that at all.

So go ahead and ask her if that's what you want to do. And thank you for asking me first, that really means a lot to me," he told her.

Melissa threw her arms around his neck and planted her lips to his.

"Thanks, Rick, you're the greatest," she said.

As the two of them walked up to the church, Melissa and Katie exchanged glances. Melissa shook her head up and down. Katie knew what it meant. So Katie walked up to Susie and her mom.

"Excuse me, but could we have a word with the two of you please?" she asked.

Unknowing what it was about, they agreed, but both of them were very leery about it. When Susie and her mom were standing in front of them, Susie had something to say before anyone else. "I heard about your engagements. I must have left yesterday before it happened, but I just wanted you all to know that I'm very happy for all of you. Really, I mean that," Susie explained, even though she was still having a hard time talking with her jaw, wired shut and all.

"Well, we're glad to hear that, and thank you from all of us. But that's kind of what we wanted to talk to you about. We were wondering if you would like to be our maid of honor," Katie asked her.

The question had caught Susie and her mom totally off guard.

"Are you serious?" Susie asked.

"Sure are," Melissa answered.

"But why me? After everything that I've done to all of you. You keep acting like you've forgotten how big of a bitch I really was," Susie said as she tried to keep from crying.

"Let me see if I can explain this," Rick began, "and, ladies, feel free to jump in here if I get lost, okay? It's like this Susie, the key word in that was *was*. Whatever happened before doesn't have any bearing on what happens next. Melissa and Katie have both picked you to be their maid of honor, and if that's what they want, then Mike and I have no problem with their request, so now it all falls to you."

“All of you guys have been so nice to me. I can’t believe it. Everything that I’ve done in my life has all been about me, and what I wanted had no concern about anyone else. But you just keep on surprising me. Time after time again, you’ve been at my side. Katie, my only regret is that I didn’t meet you a lot sooner ’cause you’ve changed my life around. I would be letting you all down if I said no. And friends don’t let friends down, so of course the answer is yes. I would be honored to be your maid of honor,” she told them.

Katie and Melissa each took turns exchanging hugs with Susie. Rick and Mike did too.

“Rick to you I owe you a special apology. I’m really sorry for what I did to you. I hope someday you’ll forgive me and put it in the past,” Susie told him.

“Already have, Susie. Already have,” Rick replied.

“Really? God, what did I do to deserve friends like all of you?” she asked.

“Well, we’re not quite done yet. There’s a small matter about your house,” Katie told them.

“I can answer that. We’ve found a place to move to, but it won’t be ready for a few weeks, so if you would allow us the time, I would really appreciate it,” answered Susie’s mom.

“No, I’m sorry. That just won’t work. Not at all,” Katie told her.

“But where will we go? Where will we live?” Susie’s mom asked.

“How about right where you are now?” Katie said as she pulled a large envelope from her purse and handed it to her mom.

“What’s this?” she asked

“Why don’t you read it before you ask that?” Katie told her.

She opened the envelope and pulled the papers out and started reading them. “I don’t understand,” replied Susie’s mom.

“What’s to understand? You now own your house free and clear. So why would you ever think of moving?” Katie explained.

“You’re giving us the deed to our house? But why would you do such a thing? I don’t understand what it is that you want in exchange for this,” she tried to explain her concerns.

“What we want? We don’t want or require anything from you. Look at it this way. Your husband got caught up in a bunch of underhanded stuff, but why should you and your daughter here have to pay for it? It just wouldn’t be right.

“And I mean no disrespect toward you or your choice of husbands. You just didn’t know about all of the lies that he was forcing you to live with. So take those papers and move on with your life. Focus your energy on your husband’s defense if that’s what you want to do. Having to worry about a roof over your head shouldn’t be your main concern,” Katie told her.

“See, Mom, I told you that Katie Windslow was an angel,” Susie proclaimed.

“Well, I guess you are right, Ms. Windslow. God bless you and your dad. Words will never be written that could express how I feel right about now,” she said as she started crying.

Katie took the weary lady into her arms and hugged her.

“Your happiness is payment enough. But I’ll be sure to pass your message on to my daddy when I see him,” she told her.

“Excuse me, but I think it’s time to go inside now,” Mike told them.

As they all walked into the church, Katie and her four friends were ushered to the front row of pews again. Father Mathews walked up to Katie and leaned over to whisper into her ear.

“Where’s your father at? I don’t see him here today,” he asked.

“I’m sorry, Father, but my dad is a bit under the weather today. You know, all of the excitement from yesterday and all,” she explained to him.

“Of course, I do understand. But I was hoping to see him here today. He was the inspiration behind today’s sermon,” he told her.

“Well, I’m sure that he’ll be sorry that he missed it,” she answered.

“Well, if he isn’t feeling, well, I guess there’s not much we can do about it then. What about you? Are you planning on singing today or not?” he asked.

“Oh, I’ll sing if you want me to. I have a lot to be happy about today,” she told him.

“Yes, I heard that we have two new engagements among us. Congratulations to all of you. You’ll have to excuse me. Time to go to work,” he told them as he turned toward the pulpit.

As he took his place before his congregation, the room suddenly got quiet. “Welcome to your house of worship. You know I’m going to go off the beaten path here today because of a man that has inspired me to believe in myself and in God. The Bible tells us many different stories, doesn’t it? Or does it?

“Think about it. What does the Bible tell us? What does it ask us to do? Have you ever thought about what it’s teaching you as you read from its pages? What does the Book of Revelation say to you? Yes, the Bible does talk about the ending of the world, doesn’t it? Does it not speak of Satan’s return. But those that believe in Christ shall have what? Eternal life, right?

“So are we supposed to think that just by reading this book from cover to cover, we are all guaranteed eternal life in God’s kingdom? Well, if you think that, you’re in for a rude awakening, aren’t you?

“Throughout the Bible, you are asked to do three things.

“You’re asked to praise God. You’re asked to accept God, but most important of all, you’re asked to believe in God.

“Do you really think that a few thousand people can be fed with a few fish and a few loaves of bread? Ask yourself if all of us here were to be fed with only a few pieces of fish and a few loaves of bread. Wouldn’t you still be hungry for more?

“Not if you believed in God’s word. If God told you that you would be hungry no more, and you truly believed in him, then your hunger would be

gone, would it not?

“But there are rules aren’t there? Of course there are. But if you want to know what question it is that I hear most, it’s if God is so mighty, so powerful, why then doesn’t he simply do away with war, murder, rape, and all of the rest of everything evil in this world?

“Good question, isn’t it? Well, I have a great answer for it.

“If God did away with everything evil, if he killed off Satan, if he made this world a perfect kingdom, then how would you stand up to everyone else when you get to heaven’s gate? What would set you apart from me?

“You see, Satan has to remain. He just has to be. And why is that you ask? One word—*temptation*. Without it, where would we be? We’d be in one hell of a mess.

“Your parents taught you the difference between right and wrong, didn’t they? Well, where do you think your parents got their education? From their parents and from here in God’s house from God’s book.

“So believe in God no matter what you do. Believe each and every word that you read from God’s book, and believe in Jesus Christ as your savior, and eternal life in God’s kingdom is yours. Guaranteed. But only if you truly believe in God and the power of his words.”

As Father Mathews finished his sermon and took the rest of the congregation into prayer, Katie closed her eyes and thought about her mother. She had always been able to know whenever her mom was around. It was a warming sensation down deep inside. And as always, she didn’t have to wait very long.

*Mom, is that you?* she asked to herself.

*You know it is,* answered her mom.

*Mom, I don’t think I need your help singing today. I want to do this on my own,* she told her.

*Katie, I have a surprise for you. I didn’t help you last time. I was there to give you support just as I am now,* her mom answered.

*But I felt you . . . inside . . . and that glow that was behind me. That wasn't you? Katie asked her.*

*Katie sweetheart, you felt me inside because that's where your heart is, Katie. I can't do much from where I am. It's not that I don't want to, sweetheart, but your father and I raised you to be strong, to have confidence in yourself, and it appears that we did a pretty good job. Everything that you have done so far, and everything else that you will do, is all done by you. God and I can't jump in and save you. Your choices are yours. You were raised in a very loving home, Katie, and I could never be any prouder of you than I am right now. But your life is yours to live. And that mysterious glow that everyone saw, well, that was God's doing. Believe it or not, sometimes he just likes to show off. But you do understand what I'm telling, right? her mother asked.*

*I do. I really do. I just thought that you were guiding me, Katie told her.*

*Katie, I taught you to guide yourself, dear. Everything that your father and I taught you from the day that you were born, that's what's guiding you. You're a very good person, Katie, and you make me proud. But I can't be watching over you every minute of the day. I have to hope that you'll make the right choices on your own. And you have.*

*And for those special times in your life like the birth of your children, your upcoming wedding, and even when it's your time to join me here, I'll be there for you then. And if you need some guidance, then I'll be there to help you. Okay, sweetheart? her mom explained.*

*Okay, I understand. It's just that I love you and miss you so much. Wait a second, you know that I'm getting married? Katie asked.*

*Well, of course I do. I might not see everything, Katie, but God does. And he told me that this was a good thing. You'll be very happy, Katie. I'll be there. I promise. Hey, I hate to do this, but I have to go. Your father needs me. You take care, okay, sweetheart? I love you, her mom told her.*

*I love you too, she said as she opened her eyes. Father Mathews was just finishing the prayer. Katie turned her attention back to Father Mathews.*

“Last week, we were blessed with the singing voice of a very charming and talented young lady. And it’s my honor to have her back with us this week as well. Now before she comes up here, I need to apologize to her and to all of you for something that didn’t happen last week.

“When Ms. Windslow sang, everyone saw a glow radiating from behind her. I give you my word that it was not staged in any way. Not by us nor by Ms. Windslow.

“What you all saw was a true miracle. But instead of jumping for joy and announcing it as the work of the Lord, I failed you all when I questioned it. For that, I apologize from the bottom of my heart. And that is why I gave the sermon that I did today. Religion is having the faith to believe in your God. Always, each and every day, in everything that we do. And last Sunday, I actually failed to do that, which wasn’t right. So to all of you, again I apologize for letting you all down.

“So with that all being said, I’d like to again welcome Ms. Windslow back up to the microphone.”

Katie walked up to the microphone and stood there for a few seconds before she spoke.

“Thank you, Father Mathews. With your permission, I’d like to do something totally different for all of you today. Is that all right?” she asked.

“Whatever you want to do is all right with us. May I inquire as to what you’re planning to do?” he asked.

“I want to sing a song that’s called ‘In Your Heart,’” she told him.

“That will be fine, but I don’t think I know that one,” he said.

“Well, considering I just wrote it in my head, I didn’t think that you would,” she answered.

“You just wrote a song in your head and you want to sing it for all of us here? Well, this should be interesting. Whenever you’re ready—wait what about music?” he asked.

“Nothing personal, but I don’t think I’ll be needing it today,” she answered.

“Really? So whenever you’re ready, you may begin.”

Katie began,

“Late at night, when I close my eyes for sleeping,  
I dream of all those wonderful promises that you’re keeping.  
And when I wake to greet each new day,  
I look around, and I’m blessed to see you all around me.  
In your heart, I know that I’m forever safe,  
At my side, I know that you’ll be there to protect me.  
As I journey through my life, I may sometimes stumble,  
In your heart, I know that you’ll catch me before I fall.  
Late at night, when I close my eyes for sleeping,  
And I know that someday I will be there beside you,  
At your side in the glory of your kingdom.  
In your heart, you lead me not to temptations  
But deliver me to salvation, a place in heaven forever  
In your heart where the sun shines down from above.  
You paid for our sins with your one only son.  
In your heart, I know that I am truly loved.  
Your gift that you sent down from your heart.  
Late at night, when I close my eyes for sleeping,  
I dream of all those wonderful promises that you’re keeping.  
And in your heart, I know that I will be warm  
As I hold your undying love forever in my heart.  
Late at night, when I close my eyes for sleeping,  
I dream of all those wonderful promises that you’re keeping.  
And I wonder if I am truly worthy of your love  
As I kneel before you and reach out to touch the hand of God.”

When she had finished, there was silence. Nobody spoke. Nobody even moved a muscle. Father Mathews just stood there, a look of total disbelief

came over his face.

“You just thought that up in your head while you were sitting there and then you sang it perfectly?” he asked Katie.

“Yes, sir. Why? Did it not come out the way that it should have?” she asked.

“Ladies and gentlemen, normally we do not whoop, holler, and cheer in this chapel of God,” Father Mathews said. However, if there are any of you out there that would like to clap or whatever to show Ms. Windslow here just what you thought of her song, I’m fairly certain that God will understand.”

Nobody did anything. Katie was about to walk away from the microphone, totally discouraged that nobody had liked her song. Michael was the first to stand up and started clapping. He was followed by Melissa and Rick, and then the whole congregation was on their feet clapping with approval. Katie’s heart soared to new heights.

Katie turned to see Father Mathews clapping right along with the rest of them. She suddenly realized that she was blushing, her cheeks turning a very distinctive shade of red. As Katie slowly made her way back to her seat, the applause started to die off. Everyone around her was patting her on the shoulder or on her back and telling her how much they had liked her singing. She just nodded her head with approval. Michael gave her a small peck on the cheek as she sat down.

“Thank you, Michael,” she told him.

“That, my dear Katie, was . . . well, beyond words,” Michael said. She just looked back at him and smiled.

Father Mathews tried to bring some kind of order back to his once-quiet little church.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please,” he said as the crowd became quiet again. “Thank you, that is so much better.”

He just stared at Katie. “Ms. Windslow, you’re just one surprise after another, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t try to be . . . It just happens,” she told him.

“Well, you are, and you’ll just have to take my word for it. You are,” he told her.

“Well, thank you, Father. That was very kind of you,” she answered.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, that will conclude our sermon for today. I’m not even going to attempt to top that.

“And by the way, all you single guys out there, I have some rather bad news for you all. Ms. Windslow is now engaged to Mr. Michael Gibbes, so you’re out of luck.

“Let’s close this with nice simple little prayer, shall we?” As the father lead them through a short but sincere prayer, Katie was thinking about what her mom had said. She would be there for the birth of her babies, at her wedding, and when it was her turn to go to heaven, but then she said that her daddy needed her.

*No, not, Daddy! Not now!* she said to herself. As soon as the father had finished and everyone was standing to leave, Katie looked at Michael and Melissa.

“We need to go home . . . right now. I think Daddy is in trouble,” she told them.

“Trouble? What kind of trouble?” Michael asked.

“Michael, I’ll explain on the way. We have to go now . . . Please, Michael,” she said as the tears from her eyes started to run down her cheeks.

“Katie, okay, calm down, sweetheart. We’re leaving right now, okay?” Michael told her. He looked over at his sister. “Help her out to the car, okay? Something isn’t right. I’ll be there in a second,” he told her.

“Sure, no problem. Come on, Katie. Let’s go to the car,” she told her as she held the totally distraught woman against her.

Mike ran over to Father Mathews and explained what was going on.

“My God, is he okay?” Father Mathews asked.

“We don’t know anything yet. But you know Katie. She doesn’t do this without a reason,” Mike told him.

“Well, you go on, and I’ll summon some help just in case,” the father suggested.

“Thanks, I’ll let you know as soon as we do,” Michael said as he ran toward the car.

Michael drove as fast as he could, even running two red lights as he tried to get to Katie’s house in record time.

As they entered the driveway to Matterson House, they were followed in by two fire trucks, an ambulance, and the local sheriff with Father Mathews himself bringing up the rear.

They were out of the car even before it stopped. As they all ran into the house, Katie called for her dad.

“Daddy! Daddy, where are you?” she yelled but got no response.

“Grady!” Michael yelled followed by Melissa and Rick. They went upstairs and downstairs, but there was no sign of him.

“Michael, where is he? Something has happened to him. I just know it. I know it in my heart,” she told him.

“We’ll find him, Katie. We’ll find him,” he told her. But to himself, he was getting a bad feeling about this. It didn’t look good.

Everyone was running around yelling for him. Everyone from Father Mathews to the firemen, all of them were looking for Grady. But he was nowhere to be found.

Now clear across the meadow, Grady and Aaron were walking and talking about the current events of last week. Grady stopped and turned toward the house.

“Do you hear something? It sounded like sirens,” Grady asked.

“Yeah, I did. Kind of sounded like it was coming from your place, didn’t it?” Aaron answered back.

Grady looked at his watch. "Church shouldn't be done already! Still, I think it's time we head back toward the house," he said with a hint of caution to his voice.

"I agree. Let's head back," Aaron said.

As they rounded the hill, they could see the house and all of the emergency equipment with their revolving red lights.

"Katie! Something is wrong with Katie," he said in a very serious voice.

"How do you know that?" Aaron asked.

"Well, there's only two people that live there, and as you can clearly see, there ain't nothing wrong with me, so it has to be Katie," Grady replied.

"I see your point. I'm sure that it's nothing, but let's go," Aaron said as Grady flew by him.

"Damn! For an old fart, you sure can run fast," Aaron yelled as he fought to catch the old man.

"When it comes to my Katie, I can damn near fly," Grady yelled back to the government agent that was falling behind. "You'd better get out from behind your desk more often, especially if you want to keep up with me. Hell, son, you're out of shape!" Grady yelled back to him.

But Aaron didn't hear him. All he could hear was the pounding of his heart in his chest. "Crazy old fart!" Aaron yelled as he slowed down considerably.

Grady flew up onto the porch just about the time Katie had come out of the front door.

"Katie, are you all right?" he yelled.

"Daddy, are you all right?" she yelled too.

The two of them just stared at each other, and then they threw their arms around each other.

"Daddy, I thought you were in trouble," she told him.

“Me? I thought you were in trouble. I saw all of the emergency stuff, and I thought you were hurt,” he said.

Michael came out onto the porch. “Grady, thank God you’re okay,” Mike told him.

“Well, of course I am! Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked.

About that time, Melissa came around from the back side of the house and saw Grady standing up on the porch with Katie and her brother. “Oh, Grady, thank God you’re okay,” she told him as she tried to catch her breath.

“Why does everyone keep saying that? Dang nabbit! I’m as fine as a rooster in a hen house. So what in the darn nations is going on here? I go for a little walk, and the next thing I know, everyone thinks that I’m dead or something,” Grady told them.

Katie explained what her mom had said, and then she just looked at her dad. “I was afraid that I had lost you too,” she told him.

“I did ask to talk to your mother, Katie. I was going to tell her about you getting married and all. Should have figured she already knew,” he told her.

About that time, Father Mathews came out of the house. “Oh, thank God you’re okay, Grady! You had us scared half to death,” he told him as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

Everyone just looked at him, and they all started laughing.

“What? Was it something that I said?” he asked.

Aaron seeing that everything was all right just stopped and fell to the ground. “I really need to get out more,” he said as he fell onto his back. “Crazy old fart.”

# Shotguns not Required

After all of the emergency people had left, they all sat around the dining room table laughing about the day's events. Then the conversation turned to wedding talk—no, more like double-wedding talk.

“Excuse me, can I say something about all of this?” Melissa asked. There was no response from anyone, so she continued. “You’re all talking about having the weddings in six to eight weeks. I can’t do that. I do have to go back to school, remember?”

“And while I could take a whole semester off, I would have to spend the next two semesters trying to play catch-up. I really rather not do that if it’s all right with all of you. So may I make a suggestion? Let’s do this within the next two weeks or so. I can miss a week or so, but—” Katie cut her off.

“Well, you heard her, and she’s right. She shouldn’t have to miss school to get married. So my question to all of you is this, can we pull this off in the next two weeks, yes or no?” she asked.

“Well, we did a pretty good job with the unveiling of the gold, and we only had four days or so for that, so I reckon if we were to put our minds to it. Yeah, we could pull it off,” Grady said in a very positive tone.

“Well, if you ask me, there’s only one thing that I can see that would stop us, and that would be you, ladies,” Rick told them.

“Wait a second. Why would we stop it from happening?” Katie asked.

“Simple,” he told them. “Us menfolk can wear our best suits, but you ladies need to have a wedding gown. You just have to,” Rick told them.

And everyone knew that he was right. The ladies had to have wedding dresses, and not something that they could buy off of the shelf at the local boutique either.

“Okay, so if we girls can get dresses made in time, then we can do this, right?” Melissa asked.

“I don’t see any reason why we couldn’t, but I don’t think you’ll be able to get a dress made that fast, and you need two of them,” Rick told her.

Melissa looked at Katie and smiled. Katie stared back at her with a questionable stare.

“You’re on. We’ll get the dresses. You guys do the rest. Deal?” Melissa asked.

“Wait a doggone second. The rest of what?” Mike asked.

“Okay, that was a little lost in translation, but what I meant was you guys start getting everything moving. Katie and I will be busy for about two, maybe three, days. Okay?” Melissa answered.

“Excuse me, but what are we going to be doing for two to three days?” Katie asked.

“We’re going to go see a magician. You’ll just have to trust me, okay? I promise you that not only will we have our dresses, but they’ll be very glamorous as well,” Melissa explained.

“Okay then, it’s settled. You ladies will work on your dresses while the three of us menfolk will start putting things together. This should be a piece of cake,” Grady said as he pulled his pipe from his pocket.

“Grady, do you have any idea of what putting on a wedding will consist of, let alone a double wedding?” Rick asked.

“Sure! A big cake, a bunch of flowers, and a lot of alcohol,” he answered.

“Daddy, what makes you think our guests will have to have alcohol?” Katie asked.

“Your guests? Hell, that’s for us. I figure by the time this is all said and done, we’ll be needing it. A lot of it, I might add,” he answered.

“Very funny, Daddy. I would think that after this morning, you would never look at another drink again, let alone drink one,” Katie told him.

“You’re right. I’ll never drink another drink that contains alcohol ever again. But six or seven of them, that I might do,” he said with a smile.

“Yeah, very funny,” Katie said as she looked over at Mike who was trying not to laugh. “And what do you find so funny?” she asked.

“Nothing. But I was thinking the same thing. One drink, nope. But a half dozen or more, sure,” he answered.

“Great the two of you can stick together,” she replied.

“Sounds like a plan. Rick, you care to join us. We’re going to go get blind stinking drunk?” Grady asked.

“Not me. Alcohol makes me sick. Never cared for the taste of it,” he answered.

“Who does? That’s why you drink more than one of them. After the first few, your taste buds pass out, then it’s all downhill from there,” Grady told him.

“Downhill? That doesn’t sound all too promising,” Melissa said as she looked at the three men. “What do you get when you get to the bottom?” she asked.

“Well, Melissa, I thought that with you being in college and all, you would know the answer to that question,” Grady told her.

“Sorry, I’m studying American history, not American mentality. Besides, I don’t drink, never have,” she answered.

“Oh, you will sooner or later. If only to give it a try,” he answered.

“Well, we’ll see. But you never answered my question. What do you get at the bottom of the hill?” she asked again.

Grady just stared at her. “When you get to the bottom, you get a refill, and then you can go again,” he answered.

“A refill? Is that all you get?” she asked.

“What were you expectin’, a medal?” Grady asked.

“No, not really, just something more than a blooming refill. Anyways, it doesn’t much matter. I don’t drink,” Melissa told him.

“Famous last words for someone who hasn’t even tried a drink yet. We’ll remember that when you get drunk the first time. And you’re throwing up out behind the outhouse,” Grady told her.

“They don’t even have outhouses anymore!” Melissa added.

“Outhouse. In house behind the house. It doesn’t really matter. Throwing up is still throwing up. And then when you’re done throwing up, you’ll go get another drink. Trust me,” Grady told her.

“All right, you two, enough of this throw-up talk. You’re making me sick to my stomach,” Katie told them.

“Want another drink?” Grady said with a hint of laughter to his voice.

“Daddy, enough is enough already. We have two weddings to plan. And we don’t have all that much time to do it,” Katie told them.

“Funny that’s what you’ll say right before you throw up,” Grady told her.

“What is?” Katie asked.

“Enough is enough, then you throw up, and suddenly, you feel better. Then you’ll have another drink,” he answered.

“Daddy, stop it! We really need to talk about wedding stuff. So no more fooling around. Okay?” she asked.

“Okay. Gee whiz, a guy can’t even joke around anymore. You need to loosen up your corset a tad or two,” Grady told her.

“No, I don’t. I’m not even wearing a cor—Wait a second. Why am I explaining to you what I am and am not wearing underneath my dress?” she asked.

“Well, maybe your dad isn’t interested in what you’re wearing, but you’ve certainly have my blood pressure going,” Mike told her.

“You! I’ll deal with later, but right now, let’s start making the arrangements shall we?” she said as she turned to look at Melissa. “You can jump in and help me anytime you’re ready.”

“Oh yeah, I’m sorry, Katie. But I just had this vision of me throwing up. It wasn’t a pretty sight,” she answered.

“God, not you too?” Katie asked.

“Well, your dad sounded like a voice of experience. It made me think, is all,” Melissa answered.

“Experienced? I’ll have you know that I can outdrink and outvomit everyone here at this table,” Grady told her.

“Stop it, just stop it, okay? What kind of cake shall we have?” Katie asked as she tried to change the subject.

“I know. We can serve rum cake. That will fill them up and get them drunk,” Rick suggested.

“That does it! I give up. What’s the use? Daddy, pour me a drink,” she asked.

“Now you’re talking,” Grady replied.

“I’m just kidding. Like I really need a drink. I’m already surrounded by a bunch of immature clowns. Why would I add alcohol to the fire? We really need to get working on this stuff. And while it may not be important to any of you, it is to me. And I would have thought that you, Melissa, would have taken a more serious approach. I mean, hell, it’s only our wedding. It has to be done right,” Katie told all of them.

“Katie, you’re right, and it is important to me too. So what do you all say? Do we cut the comedy crap and focus on the important stuff?” Melissa asked.

“Okay, fine, bunch of party poopers anyways,” Grady answered.

“Now wait a second, Daddy. We’re not a bunch of party poopers, and you know it. But Mom’s greatest dream was for me to get married to a wonderful man and live happily ever after. And you know that. You’ve told me that story a thousand times, so please help me do this. Okay?” Katie damn near begged.

“All right, no more jokes. And, yes, I do recall telling you that, but it was more like a million times, okay?” Grady asked.

“Good. Now about the cake. Can we make it on our own, or will we have to buy it?” she asked.

“Well, we could make our own, but add that to the never-ending list that we’ll have to do as well, and the answer is obvious,” Mike added.

“True. Okay, so what can we do ourselves and what can’t we do?” she asked.

“Can I make a simple suggestion here?” Grady asked.

“Sure. We’d all like to hear your thoughts,” Mike answered.

“Well, since this is my treat, why don’t you just figure out what you all want and hire someone else to do it. That will give you two ladies the time that you’ll need to get your dresses made and all four of you the time to do what should be the most important part of your weddings,” he told them.

“The most important part? And which part is that?” Melissa asked.

“You’re kidding. Please tell me that at least one of you four knows what the most important of a wedding is,” Grady asked.

None of them knew the answer.

“I can’t believe what I’m not hearing from any of you. A marriage is the bringing together two people in holy matrimony where before God and your witnesses you repeat to each other your vows, where you express your undying love for each other. So your vows need to be special, written just for you by you. It’s what makes your wedding special, unique, and different from the rest,” Grady explained.

“Daddy, what a splendid idea. What do you guys think? We can write our own vows,” Katie asked.

“That would be super, and it would be all ours,” Melissa answered.

“Hey, wait a second. Writing our own vows is a super idea just like Melissa said, but we have a very unique opportunity here. We have two couples. That’s four people with four different ideas on what it should say. So why don’t you girls get together while Mike and I do the same? Then we’ll combine the two, and each one of us will have a different part to say,” Rick suggested.

“You lost me, sweetheart,” Melissa said.

“Okay, let’s, for the sake of argument, say Katie will start it off. She would say her line, then Mike would say his, and then Melissa would do hers, then it would be my turn. Then it would start all over again. And if we did it right, it would flow like a beautiful song. What do you all think?” Rick asked.

“I like the idea, and it might be a bit tricky to get it right, but the finished product would be our own thoughts. Yes, I like it, a lot,” Katie answered.

“I think it’s a brilliant idea. Rick dear, you surprise me sometimes. You really do,” Melissa told him.

“Where in the world did you get that idea? It’s different I’ll give you that, but to make it work, it might be a lot harder than you all think, but if you’re all willing to give it a shot, then count me in,” Mike answered.

“See, that was easy. Now all you have to do is to select just the right words, arrange them into just the right order, and memorize them. Piece of cake,” Grady told them.

“Gee, thanks for the encouragement there, Daddy dear,” Katie said as she threw him a not too pleasant smile.

“Trust me, it will all fall together if you listen to your hearts ’cause that’s where your love is,” he replied. “But I do have one other question for ya. Have you given any thought as to where you’re going to live once you’re married?”

“Well to be honest, I haven’t even given it a thought,” Rick answered.

“And what about the rest of you? You haven’t either, have you?” Grady asked.

They all confessed that they had not thought about it at all.

“Well, Katie and Mike don’t have a problem. This house is as much Katie’s as it is mine, but you two need some help,” he told them.

“Yeah, but I’ll be back at school, so it wouldn’t be an urgent problem, but after school would be another story,” Melissa answered.

“Yeah, it would be a problem indeed,” Rick answered.

“Well, help is on the way,” Grady told them.

“And what does that mean?” Melissa asked.

“Just what I said. It seems that according to Mr. James of the Treasury Department, we’ll be getting a sizeable check in a few weeks,—compensation for finding the treasure, you see. And since Melissa was in on the discovery, she’ll get a part of it,” he explained.

“Wait a second. I thought that we weren’t in this for the money. I thought that it was all about righting a wrong like you said,” Mike replied.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too,” Melissa added.

“It was for Katie and I. But why would you refuse your part?” he asked.

“Because it isn’t right, that’s why,” Melissa answered.

“Yeah, I have to agree with my sister. It just wouldn’t be right, Grady,” Mike told him.

“Are you both sure that you don’t want the money? I mean it could be a very reasonable sum. And a newly married couple could always use some spare cash,” he told them.

“Damn right, I’m sure. I mean no disrespect, but I agreed to do this to help you and Katie right a wrong done to her great-grandfather and never was there any hopes of getting rich off of this,” Mike told him.

“Yeah, and how could we live with ourselves if we went back on what we told everyone? I know that I couldn’t,” Melissa told him.

“You might want to take a few days to think this over,” Grady told them.

“I don’t need a few days. The answer is no, I don’t want the money,” Mike answered.

“And neither do I. I would rather live off the streets than go against something that I believe in,” Melissa said in a very firm voice.

“Okay, I figured that’s what your answers would be,” Grady told them. “And that’s what I told him when he told me about the money,” Grady added.

“Wait a second. You refused the money?” Melissa asked.

“No, I can’t do that. You’ll each get a letter. Just write *refused* on it and it’s done. So did you change your mind?” he asked Melissa.

“What makes you think that I changed my mind?” she asked.

“Just in the way that you asked if I had refused the money,” Grady answered.

“Well, I haven’t. I just thought that you did it without asking us first. That wouldn’t have been right,” she told him.

“Well, even if I could have refused the money for you, I think you know me better than that. I would never do anything like that without asking you,” Grady told her.

“Grady, I know that you would never do anything like that, and if my tone suggested otherwise, I do apologize,” she replied.

“That’s good to hear,” Grady told her.

“Well, now that that is done, may I be allowed to throw in my two cents’?” Katie asked.

“Sure, what are you thinking, love?” Mike asked her.

“I really think that you should take the money. And before you all start yelling at me, let me explain why. If you refuse the money, where would it go? Right back into Uncle Sam’s pocket, right? But if you took the money, then you could donate it to whatever charity you decided to donate it to. It would be a donation under your name, and maybe, just maybe, some good could come out of all this,” she told them. “But that’s just my thoughts on the matter,” she explained to them.

“God, I never thought of that. We could really put that money to work where it just might make a difference,” Melissa replied.

“Katie sweetheart, that’s a very noble idea if I ever heard one. I like it. I really do. I say yes. We should do just that,” Mike answered. “What do you think, Grady?”

“Well, it is a very good idea. And the money would be put to some good use. I do believe that it may be the very best idea that we’ve heard today. Nice job, Katie, very nice indeed,” Grady told his daughter as he reached across the table and squeezed her hand.

“Fine then, it’s agreed that we’ll accept the money and donate it to a charity of our choice. All of those in favor of this idea, please raise your hands,” Melissa asked.

Every hand was up in the air.

“Great! Let’s do it,” Michael suggested.

“Anyone have an idea as to what charity we’ll donate it to?” Melissa asked. “Because if you don’t, I do, but I can’t tell you yet. I want it to be a surprise,” she added.

“A surprise for whom?” Rick asked.

“You’ll see. But when I do tell ya, I think you’ll all agree with me,” she told them.

“Well, here’s what else we can do. Katie and I can accept ours as well and add it to the pot. How would that be?” Grady suggested.

“That’s a very generous offer, Grady. If that’s what you want to do, then by all means we’ll accept it,” Melissa told him.

“Good. Then first thing tomorrow, I’ll tell Mr. James just what we’ve decided here today,” Grady told them.

“Hey, I do have a question that’s not about money,” Katie said to all of them, but she was staring at her dad.

“Go ahead, dear, ask away,” Grady told her.

“What’s this rumor that was going around yesterday about Matterson House becoming a national park or something like that?” she asked.

“Where did you hear that? It was supposed to be a surprise,” he answered.

“I just heard a few people talking about it. So it’s true?” she asked.

“Well, yes and no. Yes, they did offer to make all of this a national historical site as well as a national park, but they haven’t said whether or not they’ll agree to my terms,” he replied.

“But we can still live here, right? I mean, it may be an old worn-down house, but I kind of like it here,” Katie answered.

“Relax, Katie. The only thing that would change would be the complete restoration of this house, back to what it once was,” he told her.

“So we would still own it and live here, right?” she asked.

“Of course. I’m not selling or giving this property to anyone other than to you and Mike when I pass on, which won’t be for sometime. There’s that little thing about grandkids that I want to do,” he told her.

“Good. Like I said, I like this old house,” Katie added.

“Well, good ’cause so do I,” Grady answered.

“Well, I have a question for you, Grady,” Melissa told him.

“Go ahead. Now’s the time to ask, I reckon,” he responded.

“What about Rings? We do have to find him. And it’s fairly obvious that Barnes won’t be much help. That would seal his doom, and in talking to Susie, she doesn’t remember where he’s buried. So what do we do?” she asked.

“Well, you’re right about Barnes. But Susie I think in time will remember more than she does now. But if you’re asking me if I intend on digging up the countryside looking for him, then the answer would be no. That would be stupid and a complete waste of time. No, missy, for now I’m sorry to say thank good old Jack will stay right where he is, I reckon. But if we do find him, then he’ll be buried with a proper send-off right next to those fourteen men and those horses. Right here on Matterson property,” he told her.

“Good. I think Jack would be happy here,” Melissa told him.

“So do I, dear, so do I,” Grady said in a very peaceful tone.

# Everything Gets Explained

As they sat around the table, Katie got up to answer a knock at the front door. As she opened it, she found herself staring at a very handsome blond-haired gentleman that she figured to be in his early thirties at least.

“Yes, may I help you?” she asked.

“You must be Katie. The reports said that you were beautiful, but I believe that to be an understatement,” he said.

“Well, thank you for the compliment, but you are?” she asked.

“Oh my, please excuse my bad manners. My name is Paul King, and I’d like to have a word with you and your dad if he’s around,” he said with a smile.

“Yeah, he’s here, but we’re not doing interviews with any papers,” she responded.

“Paper? Oh, you mean newspapers. That’s all right I’m with the U.S. Secret Service,” he said as showed her his credentials.

She looked them over and shook her head. “All right, Mr. King, if you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to him.” Mr. King followed her, shutting the front door as he came in. As they walked into the dining room, Katie announced him to her dad, “He says that he’s with the Secret Service.”

“The secret service? What did we do now?” Grady asked as he shook the agent’s hand. “Please have a seat.”

“What I would really like would be a cup of coffee, if it’s not too much trouble?” he asked.

“I’ll get it,” Katie said as she went into the kitchen with Melissa right on her heels.

“Wow, the Secret Service right here in your house,” Melissa told her.

“I know. It’s kind of exciting, isn’t it? But I wonder what it’s about,” Katie replied.

“Well, let’s go back to the living room so we can find out,” Melissa told her. Katie didn’t say a word. She adjusted the flame under the kettle and headed back to the living room.

“Well, that we’re all back here, let me see. I know that you’re Katie, Grady, and that makes you Melissa, and since you look like her, you must be Michael.” He looked at Rick. “I’m sorry, you’re?” he asked.

“I’m Rick. Melissa’s fiancé,” he answered.

“Well, glad to meet you, Rick, and it is truly an honor to meet all of you. But before I explain why I’m here, I must insist that everything that I’m about to tell you will stay just between us. It’s a matter of national security, well, kind of. Agreed?” he asked.

They all agreed not to repeat anything that they heard tonight. Just as he was about to speak, the coffee pot started whistling.

“Excuse me, the coffee is done,” Katie said as she went to the kitchen. A minute or two later, she returned with a hot cup of coffee for Mr. King, along with one for herself.

“Okay, now where to start? Well, we’ll get the really important stuff out of the way first.” From his briefcase he removed four large envelopes, each of which had their names printed on them. He handed out the envelopes to each of them. “These are certificates of appreciation directly from the president of the United States,” he told them.

Katie slid hers out onto the table. It was beautiful. Printed on the very best white ivory bond paper where imprinted the words “Certificate of Appreciation” in twenty-four-karat gold lettering. It was done in the old English style script. Below that was printed “For services Rendered From a very Grateful Nation where Patriotism Is Everyone’s Duty.” It was embossed with the presidential seal and signed Dwight David Eisenhower, President of the United States of America, dated July 4, 1955.

“He signed these yesterday?” Katie asked.

“Well, actually last night. The president did plan on attending your unveiling, but for security reasons, he couldn’t. And for that, he sends his heartfelt apologies,” the agent told them.

“Wow, the president of the United States here, at your house, Katie? That would have been too much,” Rick told her.

“Yeah, I know,” she answered.

“Anyways what I’m about to tell you may upset you at first, but hear me out, then you can yell at me,” the agent then told them.

“I don’t understand,” Grady told him.

“You will,” he said as he sipped from his coffee cup. “The president has asked me to ask you to stop digging any further,” he told them.

“Okay, now, you have us at a total disadvantage. What are you talking about?” Michael asked.

“There’s more to this story, isn’t there, Mr. King?” Grady told him.

“Yes, sir, there is. A lot more,” the agent replied.

“And if the president knows about it, then it must be something really important. Am I right so far?” Grady asked.

“You’re right on track, Grady. Would you care to take a guess?” he asked.

“If I guess wrong, would you still tell me?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. And since I’m about to tell you everything anyways, what possible harm could it do?” he said.

“Well then, let’s see. The president knows about it, so I would have to say that it would involve the president back then, which would be Lincoln,” Grady answered.

“Congratulations, sir, you get an A,” Paul told him. “Anyone else? What about you, Melissa? You’re studying American history, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Well, if it involves Lincoln, then I would have to say that he knew about the theft,” she answered.

“Yes, but it goes deeper than just knowing about it,” he answered.

“Was he involved somehow?” Katie asked.

“Keep going, you’ve almost got it,” he told them.

“He was the one that planned it or the one that hired the people to do it?” Melissa answered.

“Give that pretty lady a gold star. Now when you think of America, three things have to have honor and respect. That’s the American flag, Old Glory, if you will, America’s symbol, which is the bald eagle, and the integrity of the President. In that office sits one of the most powerful men in the world. Everyone looks up to him to guide this nation for the next four years. And if the integrity of that office should crumble, the America as you know and love would fall apart. Interesting, don’t you think?” he asked.

“But why would Lincoln do something like that?” Rick asked.

“One word and everything else should fall into place for you. Gettysburg,” he told them.

“But Gettysburg was in 1863. This happened in 1865?” Melissa answered.

“Do you really think that you could plan and execute something this big overnight? No, it took years to set this up,” he answered.

“I don’t get it. What does the battle of Gettysburg have to do with what happened in Columbia?” Rick asked.

“Melissa, would you like to answer that question?” Paul asked her.

“Let’s see. I know that the battle itself was the largest battle ever to be fought in the Western Hemisphere, but I would have to say it because of the number of casualties, from both sides,” she told them.

“Exactly. When President Lincoln heard the actual body count, he damn near fainted. In just three days of fighting, the Army of the Potomac lost over twenty-three thousand while the Army of North Virginia suffered over twenty-eight thousand casualties. That’s fifty-one thousand men . . . dead. And that doesn’t even count the thousands that were injured or maimed. And I heard that you ladies cried over a few dead horses. Well, five thousand horses died that day as well,” he told them as he waited for the numbers to sink in.

“My God, that’s terrible. So many brave and courageous men dead. Makes you think, doesn’t it?” Katie said as she quietly wiped a tear from her eye.

“Yes, it does at that,” Grady answered in a very remorseful tone.

“And to make matters even worse, General Meade allowed Lee to escape back into Virginia. Had he stopped him right there, the war would have been over that day. But it wasn’t over for three more years,” Paul told them.

“Damn, that’s a hell of a price to pay for just one mistake,” Mike said.

“It sure was at that. So on the following day, Lincoln met with his chief military advisors and told them to find a way to end this war. ‘And do it now. I don’t care how you do it, just get it done. Too many of our men are dying.’ Or something along those lines anyways. So they came up with this brilliant plan. Beautiful it was in design and thought only. But in reality, it was a screw up from the word *go*,” Paul said as he finished his coffee. Melissa went to get him a refill. When she returned, he continued. He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and handed to Grady. “Those are the names of those fourteen skeletons that you found in that makeshift grave. The president would like you to post their names on a marker so they’ll never be forgotten,” Paul explained.

“No problem. But how did you come up with the names of fourteen slaves?” Grady asked.

“Who said that they were slaves? Those were fourteen brave volunteers from the first Negro regiment of the Union Army. They knew the risk that they were taking. And they paid for it with their lives,” Paul told him.

“Well, I’ll be damned. I never thought of that,” Grady replied.

“But if the Union Army or you say Lincoln knew about the gold, how did they lose it after they stole it?” Mike asked.

“Good question. The answer would be stupidity. While the drivers were in fact Union soldiers from the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts, which, if you didn’t know, was the very first Negro unit ever to see actual battle under the command of a young but brave Colonel Robert Shaw. Anyways,

they were told to drive the wagons, but they were never told that they were supposed to go to Atlanta, and not Savannah. And by the time the Union command figured out that something was wrong, they were only able to catch up with the last two wagons. But there wasn't any gold on those wagons, just personal stuff that was stored in the banks," Paul explained.

"But if the Union Army knew about it, why didn't they stop them?" Mike asked.

"They tried. But picture this in your mind. You have six wagons of stolen Confederate gold while a small regiment was assigned to protect the wagons. So every time that they had to report something that wasn't happening as it should have, they would have to send a small detail back to headquarters wherever that was. Those soldiers disappeared off the face of the earth. And before long, there wasn't very many troops guarding the gold at all. Then they disappeared too. And finally, the gold was gone. Vanished like it was never there. Unbelievable," Paul said as he stood up to stretch.

"So what did Lincoln say when he learned that the gold had disappeared?" Katie asked.

"Well, the records indicate that he was as mad as a wet hound taking a piss in the wintertime. Please excuse my language, ladies. I sometimes forget to watch my manners. I do apologize to the both of you," Paul told her.

"It's quite all right, Mr. King. We've heard a lot worse from my daddy over here," Katie replied.

Grady just threw his daughter an uneasy stare.

"Well, I guess so. All of that work and planning and for what? Nothing," she proclaimed.

"Oh, no, it wasn't for nothing. Not at all. Remember, just ninety days after the gold was stolen and Columbia was burned, Lee surrendered. Our history books will tell you that he was beaten. But the truth of the matter was that the Confederacy was flat broke. Rumors even say that when Lee turned over his own personal firearm, it was empty of all the caps. Some say because they couldn't afford to buy any. Think about that," he told her.

“So Lincoln’s plan did in fact work. I mean it did end the war, didn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes, it did. And that’s why it’s so important to preserve his name and maintain the office and the title of the president of the United States. And if you were to ask each American who was their favorite president, an amazing 82 percent of them would say Lincoln. So it’s extremely important that his name remains untarnished at all cost. There’s only one known document that can tie Lincoln to all of this,” Paul said as he looked at Grady.

“And where is that?” Grady asked.

“Well, the very last person to have it was, well, your brother, Jack,” he said as waited for a response from Grady.

“My brother, Jack? Why would he have it?” he asked.

“Do you have any idea what Jack did for a living? I mean, really?” he asked.

“Well, to be openly frank with you, no, I don’t,” Grady told him.

“Let me tell you the truth about your brother. He loved America more than life itself. And he wasn’t afraid to lay down his own life in defense of his country. When December 7, 1941 rolled around, and the attack on Pearl Harbor was under way. Your brother was in Washington DC standing not more than three feet away from the President Roosevelt when he received the telegram of the attack. Did you know that?” Paul asked.

“I had no idea. But why was he there?” Grady asked.

“Well, they had just finished having lunch, and they were talking about what Jack had told and shown him—two gold double-eagle Confederate coins. Now both the President and Jack knew what those coins were and the importance of recovering all of them.

“Jack tried to get the president to send him to Hawaii to help with the destruction that was left after Japan’s surprise attack there, but Roosevelt insisted that he return to Savannah and find the rest of the treasure.

“Jack told the president that he wasn’t an official of the U.S. government and wouldn’t have any authority to do anything in Savannah. So the president picked up the phone and called the director of the Secret Service and told him to make Jack an agent. Well, in order for him to be effective, he needed a code name, so when the Roosevelt asked what name he wanted to use, Jack looked down at his hands and replied with ‘Rings.’ And from then on, he was known as Rings. And I might also add that this was the only time in history that the president had ever used his power to the point that he had for Jack. It never happened before or since. Now since every other agent had to go through the training and whatever else was required to be an agent and Jack was appointed by the president, he pretty much had unwritten clout to do as he wanted whenever he wanted. I bet you didn’t know that about good old Jack either, did ya?” Paul asked.

“You know, I do recall him telling me some wild stories about him having lunch with the president on more than one occasion, but hell, I always thought that he was just spinning a tale, a wild one at that,” Grady told him.

“So what you’re actually saying is my Uncle Jack was an agent for the government? Wow, I’m impressed,” Katie told him.

“Well, Jack was in a league of his own. But when he sent those coins to Washington, the doors threw open to greet him. But in everything that he did, he was always watching his back as well as everyone else’s too. But when he got down here, he made one mistake, a mistake that would ultimately cost him his life,” Paul told his now captive audience.

“And what was that?” Grady asked.

“Well, to answer that, let me ask you one question. What is your first impression of this Barnes character? Would you see him as dangerous or what?” Paul asked.

“Maybe underhanded, sly, rude, but no, I wouldn’t consider him dangerous, not at all,” Grady answered.

“Wait a second. I have a question. Why do we and everyone else just call him by his last name of Barnes. Doesn’t he have a first name. I really don’t care, but it’s been bugging me for the longest time,” Rick told them.

“Yeah, he does, but when you find out what it is, I mean, what it says on his birth certificate, you might understand why he never told anyone,” Paul explained.

“Well, don’t just keep us in suspense. What’s his real name?” Melissa asked.

“On the official records, his name is listed as Beatrice Anne Barnes,” he told them.

“Beatrice? That’s a girl’s name. You’re kidding, right? I mean Beatrice Anne Barnes, surely you’re just kidding. Aren’t you?” Katie asked.

“No, not really. That’s the name that his parents gave him all right, Beatrice Anne Barnes. I guess that they really wanted a girl but got him instead,” Paul told them.

“Well, I’ll be. Beatrice? Now that’s just downright funny. But from your question about him being dangerous and all, am I right to assume that he was—how do they say it—a wolf in sheep’s clothing?” Grady asked.

“Sir, I could not have explained it any better if I had tried. He was extremely dangerous. In fact, when we were told about your discovery, we sent almost three hundred agents here just in case,” Paul told them.

“No way. I didn’t see no three hundred secret service agents running around here. I think you’re pulling my leg, sir,” Katie told him.

“Really? And where do you think that many Confederate soldiers came from on such short notice? And in fact, Grady sir, you kicked one of our agents in the ass right on your stage,” Paul informed him.

“No, I didn’t. In fact, the only person’s butt I kicked in the ass was that little turd—no. No way. Walter Mitchell is one of your agents?” Grady asked.

“Yes, sir, I’m afraid so. And by the way, those insults that he shot at you were all a part of the plan. So please don’t hold it against him,” Paul added.

“Well, I’ll be! He just doesn’t look the type. I mean, not anything like a secret agent should I would think.” Grady told him.

“Excuse me for asking, but just what would you want us to look like? We’re not the FBI for Christ’s sake. They all wear the same standard issue suit and tie. And you can spot one of their agents out in a crowd. We’re better than that,” Paul told them.

“I’m sorry, I meant no disrespect,” Grady replied.

“Relax. I look for a reason to use that FBI line every chance I get,” Paul said with a smile.

Grady returned the smile.

“So you haven’t told us why you sent so many agents to our little party,” Katie reminded the agent.

“Well, if you go back to the 1940s, there was a racial movement that was just getting a foothold into America’s culture. And that’s what Jack stumbled on to. Quite by accident in fact. Any guess from any of you?” he asked.

“Let me guess this one. The KKK?” Rick answered.

“Bravo. Exactly. The Ku Klux Klan. And now ten years later, they’re really a big problem. Especially if you’re unfortunate enough to be born black and living here in the south,” Paul added.

“But what does Barnes and the KKK have to do with each other?” Grady asked.

“Would it surprise you to find out that Barnes was just a tad short of six weeks away from becoming the next grand wizard of the KKK in the state of Georgia. That was until his own daughter shot him, that is. Getting shot by your own daughter, wow!” he explained.

“Barnes? The next grand wizard of the KKK? I find that really hard to believe,” Katie told him.

“Believe it. And you already know for a fact that he knew about the treasure. What do you think he wanted it for? He surely wasn’t going to buy his family their own house. No, sir, he wanted it to lock himself in place among the top wizards of the Klan. Think of the damage that amount of

money could bring,” Paul said as he watched the reactions of his stunned audience.

“My God! But wait a second, by the time our party happened, Barnes or Beatrice was already in custody. So what was the danger if he was already in jail?” Katie asked.

“True, we already had him. But we wanted the entire Klan. How many people did you see get arrested at your party?” he asked.

“Well, I never saw anyone getting arrested,” Katie answered as the rest of them agreed with her.

“Well, thanks to the Secret Service, there were over two hundred people arrested that day. And all of them now face federal charges. And we did it all without making a single ripple in your party. Yes, it was indeed a very good day.”

“Well, we really do appreciate that. But we would have understood if it had,” Katie told him.

“Well, while we did do it for the sake of your party, our utmost concern was when it came time to make the arrests, was not letting the other bad guys know what was going on until it was their turn to join our party, you see.”

“I do. You wouldn’t want to ruin the big surprise, would ya?” Grady said with a smirk.

“Well, here’s the beauty of all of this. When you found the treasure, and you decided to showcase it before the entire world like you did. You actually accomplished what we had been trying to do for months. And that was to get all of these guys together in one place at one time. And that, my dear sir, tells me that you’re definitely related to Jack,” the agent told him.

“Well, that and the fact that we’re both good-looking too,” Grady said with a smile.

“Indeed,” Paul said as he finished his coffee.

“Mr. King, excuse me, but do you ever think that we’ll find where Barnes buried my uncle? We would really like to have him at rest here on

Matterson property,” Katie told him.

“Excuse me, didn’t anyone tell you?” he asked.

“Tell us what?” Katie asked.

“Barnes is signing like a songbird that just found out he could sing. He’s ratting out everybody. And, yes, he did tell us exactly where he buried Jack. I’m sorry, I thought you already knew,” Paul explained.

“You know where my brother is? Why haven’t you dug him up yet?” Grady asked.

“Relax a second. He only told us yesterday. We’ll be retrieving the body, or I should say his remains in the next few days. There’s a little matter of that document that he is supposed to have on him. Remember? But once we’ve retrieved that, he will be turned over to you and your family for a proper burial,” Paul told him.

“I’m sorry for losing my temper, but it’s been a long time,” Grady explained.

“No need to apologize, sir. If it was my brother or family member, I would want done just as fast as you do. Maybe even faster if that’s possible,” Paul explained.

“Well, we do appreciate everything that you’re doing, Mr. King. Really. But just for the sake of knowing, what’s going to happen to Barnes?” Katie asked.

“Well since he killed a federal officer, he was eligible for the death penalty, but since he is cooperating with the authorities, I suspect that he’ll never see the sun rise again, except maybe through some prison bars. But don’t thank me. This country needs to thank all of you. You’re very brave and honest people. You serve your country well. I just wish that there were more people like you out there,” he told them.

“We didn’t do anything special really,” Melissa added.

“Yes, you did. There’s a lot of people out there that would have kept the treasure just for themselves. You didn’t. You did everything right, and you put not only your lives on the line, but you put your pride and honor right

out there for everyone to see. And if that's not the reason this great country is what it is, then by doggone it, I don't know what is. It is truly an honor to be in your presence, and I mean that," Paul told them.

"You're much too kind honestly," Katie told him.

"No, just honest. But I do have one more surprise for you, or I should say one of you," he told them.

"Really? And who is that?" Grady asked.

Paul looked at each of them, but he stopped when he got to Melissa. "Melissa, may I ask what your plans are for after college?" he asked.

"Well, I was planning on being a teacher. Why do you ask?" she asked.

"Well, there seems to be an opening in the National Archives for someone of your expertise. The job is yours if you want it," he told her.

"A job in the National Archives?" she asked.

"You know you may not want this job. After all, there's a zillion pieces of American history strewn all over this great country of ours, and we need someone to go out and find it and bring it home to Washington where the people of this great nation can see it and enjoy it for the next generation and those that follow. But I don't think that's your cup of tea, is it?" he asked.

"Are you kidding? Of course I want the job, but I have to ask my future husband," she said as she turned to face him. "Rick?" she asked.

"Well, gee, you'll be gone all the time, and I'll have to raise the kids all by myself and then there's the dogs and the cats that will need feeding and then—"

"Rick, a simple yes or no is all I need right now," she told him.

"Of course you can accept the job. We'll get Katie and Mike to feed the animals," he told her as she threw her arms around his neck even before he finished talking.

"Thank you, sweetheart," she said as she planted a big kiss on to his lips. When she finished, she turned to face Mr. King. "I would be honored to accept the job offer," she told him.

“No kidding? Wow, that was easy,” he told her.

“Well, congratulations, Melissa. I guess your future is set. That’s great!” Katie told her.

“Thanks, Katie. You know if it wasn’t for you guys letting me in on all of this, none of this would be possible. I know that, and I’ll never forget it either,” she said as she looked directly at Katie and Grady.

“You’re welcome, dear, but your brother here made the final decision, remember?” Grady told her.

“Yeah, I do know that. That’s what big brothers do. They look out for their little sisters, ain’t that right, brother dear?” she asked him.

“Always have and always will,” Mike answered.

“Well, I guess that pretty much wraps up my job here. But I do need to tell you if you’re ever in the capital, pay a visit to the White House. You have a very devoted fan there. Well, at least for a few more years anyways. And with that, I’ll bid you all a good night, and from me to all of you, my personal thanks. Really, thank you,” he told them as he walked to the door.

“Mr. King?” Katie called to him as he was almost to the door.

He turned to face her. “Yes, Katie?” he asked.

“I was wondering, since it appears that you and my Uncle Jack were friends, would you like to attend the service for him when we have them? I know that Jack would want you there,” she asked him.

“Katie, that’s about the nicest thing that anyone has ever done for me. By all means, yes, I’ll be there. Count on it,” he told her

“The more the merrier,” she replied.

“Okay then, I’ll see you then. And thanks for including me,” he said as he leaned over and gave her a slight peck on the cheek. “Michael is a very lucky man,” Paul added.

“He knows. I tell him that all the time,” Katie told him as she walked him to the door.

He stopped and looked at her. "I really believe that you do," he said half laughing.

Grady and everyone else said their good-byes to Mr. King as he got into his car.

"Thanks again for a very informative evening," Grady told him.

"You're welcome. If you need anything, you call me, okay? Don't think about it, just call, okay?" Paul told him.

"I will. And thanks again," Grady said as he watched the agent slowly drive away.

# Wedding Dresses Made-to-Order

Early the next morning, Katie was up before the sun. What she had discovered about her long-lost uncle was just too damn exciting to sleep through. So with a hot cup of coffee in her hand, she strolled out onto the front porch. The morning air was still and quiet. The morning sun was just making its appearance to the east. Yes, today would be a good day. She knew that in her heart.

The coffee was stronger than it was hot, but it tasted good just the same. She sat back in the rocking chair, tucking her legs up under her, and she relaxed as she sipped the coffee.

Now if she had been expecting any company that early in the morning, then she might have dressed to meet them. But she wasn't, so the bathrobe that she wore over the plain old white sundress would just have to do. Her attention turned to the main gate as a large flatbed truck followed by a light blue sedan entered the gate.

"Now who is that?" she wondered to herself. As the vehicles pulled to a stop, a very well-dressed lady exited the car, followed by a guy in a suit, and three guys that were in the truck. The lady walked up to the porch.

"Good morning, you must be Katie," the lady said.

"Well, good morning right back at ya, but you're who?" Katie asked.

"Excuse me, I'm Linda Johnstone with the National Parks Service. Your dad, uh, Grady, was expecting us. Is he awake?" she asked.

"I don't think so. May I ask what this is all about?" Katie asked.

"Certainly, my dear. We've brought the sign that he wanted," she answered.

"A sign you say? I wasn't told about any sign," Katie told her.

"That's because it was supposed to be a surprise," Grady said as he walked out of the house to greet his guest. "Good morning, Ms. Johnstone."

Katie was surprised to not only see her daddy up this early, but he was fully dressed and ready to go. She just stared at him as he walked past her, his hand reaching over to mess up Katie's hair, which didn't really matter since it hadn't been brushed yet anyways.

"Grady, top of the morning to you, sir. I'm sorry, but did we ruin the surprise?" she asked.

"Naw, she was going to see it sooner or later anyways. I guess now it will be sooner and not later," he answered back.

"Excuse me . . . Hello? What in the world are you two talking about?" she asked.

Grady and Ms. Johnstone just turned and stared back at her.

"All in due time, now go drink your coffee. I'll call ya when I'm ready for ya," Grady told her.

She just stopped dead in her tracks and stared at him. Never before had he ever told her to go away. And now she wasn't sure if she should be mad as hell or do as she was told.

Grady turned back to see his daughter still standing there with her mouth open.

"Katie, please. Go do something with your hair or something. It's a mess," he told her as he returned his attention back to Ms. Johnstone.

She just turned and walked into the house, making sure she slammed the screen door hard enough that everyone in Savannah heard it. Especially her daddy and Ms. Johnstone.

Ms. Johnstone reached into the car and retrieved a nicely folded-up map and opened it up across the hood of her car. It was a detailed map of Matterson House and the surrounding land.

"This is where I thought the cemetery should go. What do you think?" she asked as she pointed to a spot on the map.

"Yes, that would be fine. But don't forget there's the horses and fifteen men to be buried there. So make sure it's big enough," he told her.

“I thought it was fourteen. Oh wait, they found your brother, didn’t they? What was his name?” she asked.

“Jack, but he preferred Rings. So let’s get both names on the marker, okay?” Grady pulled the piece of paper from his shirt pocket. “Add these names to it as well. Those are the names of the fourteen skeletons that we found with the gold,” he told her.

“But how in the world did you come up with these names so quickly?” she asked.

“Well, I guess you could say that a friend of Jack’s brought them by,” he answered.

She just threw him a puzzled look as if she was expecting him to explain it in more detail.

“Maybe later, I’m not even awake yet,” he told her before she could ask.

“As you wish. But where do we put this big old sign?” she asked.

“Well, hell, I’m not sure. You’ll want to see it when you come through the main gate, so what about here?” he said as he pointed to a spot on the map.

“Quite an excellent choice, sir, I’ll get my guys to work on it at once,” she told him as she signaled the guys to join her.

“No big hurry. I need coffee. No, I need a lot of coffee,” he told her as he turned toward the house. “You’re more than welcome to join me if you’d like!” he yelled over his shoulder without ever turning around. If she had heard his offer, he didn’t know nor did he much care. All he wanted was his coffee. And until that happened, the world could stop rotating for all he cared. He could get it moving again later. After he had his coffee.

Katie was sitting at the dining room table drinking another cup of coffee as Grady sat down across from her. She didn’t speak nor did she look at him.

“So you going to be all pissy all day, or are you going to talk to me?” he asked her.

“I don’t appreciate being left out of things. Especially when I should be told as to what you’re up to,” she told him without taking her eyes off of her coffee cup.

“Katie, ever since your mother died, it’s been just you and I. Everything that I did, you were there. And I never complained. Not once. But now you’re getting married and all, and well, Mike will be your main concern from now on as it should be. And I’m not complaining mind ya, but for once, I want to do something for you without you being in on it before it happens. Okay? I just wanted to surprise you, is all,” he told her.

Katie turned to look at him. “Do you really think for one minute that Michael is taking your place? Daddy? Nobody could ever take your place—ever. And I guess I’m being a little selfish always wanting to be in on everything like I do. But like you said, it’s always been just us,” she told him.

“Yeah, but all good things come to an end sooner or later. That’s just how life is, I reckon. But regardless, you’re my daughter, and I love you with all my heart. It’s just that my heart isn’t as strong or as young as it once was,” he told her.

“Daddy, are you trying to tell me something? Are you okay?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m fine. But what I’m trying to say is nothing lasts forever. I’m an old man, and you’re a freshly planted flower in the springtime. Sooner or later, I won’t be around to protect you anymore. And that’s why you getting married to Michael is so important to me. So I’ll know that you’ll be loved and protected when I go to be with your mother. That’s all,” he told her.

“Well, relax, old man, you’re going to be around here for a long time to come. And I’m sorry, Mom, if you’re listening. You’ll just have to wait for him,” Katie said as she reached across the table and squeezed her daddy’s hand. “I love you, Daddy,” she told him.

“I love you too, Katie dear,” he answered.

Outside, they could hear another car pull up. Katie knew that it was Melissa. And she was nowhere near being ready to go see about the dresses.

“Daddy, tell her I’ll be down shortly!” Katie yelled as she ran upstairs.

“Tell who what?” he asked.

But there was no response from his fleeing daughter. Then came a knock on the door. Grady slowly walked over to it and opened it to find Melissa staring off at the workers.

““Morning, Grady, do you know that there’s some men digging up your yard?” she told him as she turned to face him.

“Yeah, and I was told to tell ya that she’ll be right down. But considerin’ who we’re talking about, it will most likely turn into a lie, so don’t blame me. I’m just relayin’ the message,” he told her.

“Well, don’t they always shoot the messenger?” she told him with a smile.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m telling ya that. So you don’t shoot me,” he explained.

“I could never shoot you, Grady. But what in the world are they doing to your yard?” she asked.

“Just laying out the cemetery and planting a sign. Katie doesn’t know what the sign says. It’s a surprise. It’s a tribute to her grandfather,” he told her.

“Grady, you’re so sweet and loveable. Always thinking of your daughter that way. Katie is very fortunate to have such a caring and loving father like you,” she said.

“Yeah well, some of us are blessed that way, I reckon,” he answered. “Would you like some coffee?” he asked as he turned to go back into the kitchen.

Melissa shut the door behind her. “I was beginning to think that you would never ask,” she said as she followed him into the kitchen.

About twenty minutes or so later, Katie came strolling into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” Katie said as she saw Melissa sitting at the table.

“Good morning, Katie. Are you ready to go meet a very special friend of mine?” Melissa asked.

“Sure, whenever you’re ready I suppose. But you haven’t told me who this person is. I mean, I know that we’re going to go see about our dresses, but beyond that, you have me at a total disadvantage,” Katie told her.

“You’ll just have to put your faith in me. I promise you that you’ll be pleasantly surprised,” Melissa answered.

“You know that I do. But I’m really nervous about all of this wedding stuff. Don’t get me wrong, I’m excited all right but nervous too,” Katie told her.

“No need to be nervous. Not where we’re going,” Melissa told her.

“Well, Daddy, we’re off and running. We’ll see you in a few hours or so,” she said as she kissed her daddy on the cheek. Melissa did the same.

“Wow, two beautiful young ladies kissing me. Hell, I’m a lucky man. You girls, be careful now,” he told them as they left the dining room.

As Melissa steered the car out onto the road, Katie just looked at her.

“What are you looking at?” Melissa asked.

“You, just looking at you,” she told her.

“Why? Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No. It’s just that whenever I’m around you, I get this warming sensation. You know, like I’ve known you for years instead of weeks. I find it rather nice,” Katie told her.

“I know what you’re talking about. You’re a very good friend too. And you’ll make a welcomed addition to our family,” she answered.

“Speaking of which, our wedding, we’re going to be needin’ a ring bearer, right? Because I have someone in mind if you don’t mind,” Katie told her.

“Really? And who would that be?” she asked.

“Remember Bobby? That very polite little boy that I danced with?” Katie told her.

“Oh, that little boy that likes you so much. I don’t see a problem with that. We’ll check it out with the guys, but I’m sure it will be fine,” Melissa answered back.

Melissa pulled the car onto a small dirt road that lead through a very thick grove of trees. After several turns to the right and then to the left, the car came into a clearing. At the back of this clearing stood a small cottage. It was a very simple place, nothing fancy, just a small little cottage hidden away the road by a large group of trees.

“How did you ever find this place?” Katie asked.

“It wasn’t easy, I’ll tell ya. But as you’ll soon find out, it’s worth it,” Melissa told her as she pulled the car to a stop and shut off the engine. “You ready to be impressed?” she asked.

“Sure, I think? Who lives here?” she asked.

“The lady that is going to make our weddings the wedding of all weddings. You’ll see,” she said as she got out of the car. Melissa and Katie walked up to the front door. It opened before either of them had a chance to knock on the door. A very old lady stood in the doorway. The old lady smiled as she recognized Melissa.

“Well, I’ll be, if it isn’t my favorite friend. Melissa, come give me a hug,” the old lady told her. Melissa walked up and gave her a hug.

“It’s been a long time. How are you?” Melissa asked.

“Darling, I’m getting older. Never better just older,” the old lady responded. She glanced over at Katie. “I know you. You’re the girl that sang that beautiful song at church last Sunday,” she said as she turned and gave Katie a hug as well.

“I didn’t see you at church. I would have said hi to you then,” Melissa told her.

“Well, it seems that you all ran off right after the sermon ended. I was going to say hi too,” the old lady told them.

“Well, that was my fault. I apologize for running off like we did,” Katie told her.

“That’s all right, dear. I’m sure you had your reasons. Let me think, you’re name was . . . Katie. But I can’t recall your last name. My memory ain’t what it used to be,” she told Katie.

“My name is Katie Windslow, and you are?” Katie asked.

“Well, my name is Vi or Violet, but everyone calls me Mom. So I guess you can too. Come on inside so we can talk. You’ll have to excuse the clutter. I don’t get that many visitors these days,” the old lady told them.

“Well, we’re sure that it will be just fine,” Melissa told her as she followed the lady into the house. Katie followed.

Inside the little cottage, nestled behind all of those trees, was like stepping into another world. Everywhere Katie looked, there were small ceramic statues of horses, unicorns, and other animals. Thousands of them lined the shelves all around the room. And not one of them showed any sign of dust. They were all shining as the day that they were made. But what caught Katie’s attention was a portrait that hung over the fireplace. Katie walked over to it and stared at the picture. The old lady looked at Katie.

“That’s a picture of the man that changed my life,” the old lady told Katie.

Katie turned and looked at the old lady. “And how was that?” Katie asked.

“It was before I was born actually, but his kindness to my parents was so profound that my parents changed not only their beliefs, but the way that they lived as well.

“Really? And how did he do that?” Katie asked.

“Well, it was during the war. What my parents told me was this. Several drunk Confederate troops stopped here. And of course, my parents took them in and fed them. And like I said, they were drunk, very drunk. Then they turned on my parents, beating my dad until he was damn near dead, but they were just about to do things to my mom that were just unthinkable.

And that's when this man busted through the door and came to their rescue. Now while my parents tried not to take sides in that ghastly war, Mom begged this guy not to kill the Confederate soldiers. So he told them to run before the lady changes her mind. Under the rules of combat, he should have killed them, or at the very least taken them as prisoners of war. But he didn't at my parent's request. And for that, my parents were forever grateful. But for over twenty days, this guy that you see there stayed here while his troops took care of my parents. He refused to leave until my dad was completely healed from his injuries. He wouldn't let either of them do anything. His soldiers did all of the cooking, the cleaning, and even took care of the animals while they were here. He refused any type of payment for anything. And from that day on, we were devoted Union supporters. Of course, I wasn't even born yet, but when I was just a little girl, my parents told me of his kindness over and over again. And I guess I came to appreciate this man for what he did back then. Instead of just riding away and leaving my parents to fend for themselves, he made the decision to stay and help them. And in a time of war, that was unheard of, especially back then. So I hung his portrait there to remind me of what a little kindness can do. Even in the worse of times," the old lady told Katie as she listened to every word that the old lady had to say.

"He did that?" Katie said as she pointed to the portrait above the fireplace.

"Yes, he did. Do you know who he is?" the old lady asked.

"Yes, I do. That's General Sherman, my great-grandfather," Katie told her.

"Your great-grandfather? Are you serious?" she asked.

"Oh, she's serious all right," Melissa told her.

Katie just stood there smiling at the old lady.

"Well, I'll be. Child, it's an honor to meet someone that has Sherman blood running through their veins," she told Katie as she gave her a very heartfelt hug. Katie returned the hug. "Honey, your great-grandfather was a saint sent down from heaven in the most wicked and evil of times."

“Thank you. You’re much too kind,” Katie told her.

“Come and sit down so you can tell me why you’re here,” the old lady told them. All three of them sat down, and Melissa and Katie started telling her about the weddings and the time frame that they were stuck in.

“Wow, a double wedding in two weeks? And you need two very special dresses by then. Gee, let me think for a minute. Two weeks isn’t that much time, but I’ll do it under one condition,” the old lady told them.

“And what condition would that be?” Melissa asked.

“Well, I get an invitation to both of yer all weddings, of course,” she answered.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Melissa told her.

“Of course you can come. We insist on it,” Katie added.

“Great! So let me jot down some measurement on the two of you, and I’ll get started then,” the old lady said as she went over to her sewing desk and retrieved a measuring tape.

“So do you want us to tell you what we want, or what?” Katie asked her.

“No need, child. You’ll want a dress that makes your men’s mouths water while being glamorous and elegant at the same time. Right?” she asked.

“Exactly! So can you do it? I mean, two dresses on such short notice? That’s a pretty tall order,” Katie asked.

“Child, you’ll be amazed at what this little old lady can do. Ain’t that right, Melissa?” she said as she looked over at her.

“Oh yeah, put your mind at ease, Katie ’cause everything will be just fine. Well, beyond your wildest dreams. Trust us,” Melissa told her.

“But I do have to ask you both. Did you want your dresses to have hoop skirts?” Vi asked.

Melissa and Katie both looked at each other and started laughing. “No hoop skirts,” both of them told her at the same time.

“Sorry, it’s a private joke,” Katie told the old lady with a smile on her face.

“Okay, which one of you tried it?” she asked as she threw glances at Katie then at Melissa.

“Which one of us tried what?” Melissa asked.

“You know what I’m talking about. Which one of you tried to have sex while wearing a hoop skirt?” she asked.

“Whatever made you think that?” Katie asked. The smile was gone from her face.

“Child, do you really think that you’re the first woman to ever try having sex in one of those damn things. Really?” she asked.

“Never thought about it,” Katie told her.

“So which one of you tried it?” she asked again.

Katie slowly raised her hand. “I did . . . I mean I tried, but it didn’t work out quite like I had hoped it would have,” Katie said with a devilish smirk forming on her face.

“I thought that it might had been you,” the old lady told her.

“Really, and what gave away my secret?” she asked.

“The way your face turned a bright shade of red when I asked which of you had tried it. A hoop skirt is nothing more than a very fashionable chastity belt. And that’s why we womenfolk don’t wear them anymore,” she told her.

Katie glanced over at Melissa. “And you didn’t say a word, did you? You could have jumped in to help me,” Katie said as she looked at her.

“And what was I supposed to say?” Melissa asked.

“Doesn’t matter. At least you didn’t try to do it in a hayloft or somewhere like that?” the old lady told her.

Katie turned her head to look at her. A very puzzled look came over her face.

“You didn’t, did you?” Vi asked. “Well, of course you did. I can see your answer on your face. What were you thinking?” she asked.

“I wasn’t thinking, but how in the world did you know that?” Katie asked.

“I didn’t. But of course, I do now. I just wish I could have been there to see that. It must have been funnier than hell,” the old lady told her.

Katie turned back to Melissa. “What did you tell her? You told her everything, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Hey, I swear I didn’t tell her anything,” Melissa said in her defense.

“Honey, I look at you, and I see a very beautiful and charming southern girl. And when you think of a southern girl rolling around with her boyfriend, you just think hay, as in hayloft. That’s all,” the old lady explained to her.

“Oh, really? And what do you see when you look at Melissa over there?” Katie asked.

“Well, I see her in the park or in the loft right next to you,” she told her.

“Oh, do you now? That’s interesting. Very interesting indeed,” Melissa said, a smirk upon her face.

The lady measured both of them as Katie wrote down Melissa’s measurement and vice versa. When they were finished, the lady looked at the measurements for the two women.

“Well, this will be a lot easier than I had thought. It seems that you two are almost identical in almost every area,” she told them.

“Really? I guess I never compared myself to her that closely,” Katie said as she looked at Melissa in a whole new way.

“And neither have I. But I will now. We can borrow each other’s clothes,” Melissa added.

“Well, why don’t you two ladies go on home now so I can get to work on your dresses. I have a lot to do and not much time to get it done. And as

much as I like having your company, nothing will get done while we're sitting around talking about this and that," she told them.

"Okay, I guess we'll be going then. Thanks, Mom, for everything," Melissa told her as she gave the old lady a hug.

"You're very welcome," she replied.

Katie just stood there looking at the lady.

"And you, you'll have to come back sometime and tell me about your great-grandfather," she told Katie as she gave her a hug.

"I will, I promise. And thanks again," Katie replied.

"Now, you two, get on out of here," the old lady told them.

She stood on her porch and watched as the two ladies drove off down the gravel driveway, disappearing into the trees.

# Jack Finally Comes Home

As Melissa steered the car through the main gate of Matterson House, another car was just leaving. The driver waved at the two women as they passed each other.

“Wasn’t that Mr. King?” Melissa asked.

“I think so, but I wonder what he was doing back here so fast?” Katie told Melissa.

“Well, I’m sure your dad will tell us,” she replied.

And as sure as the sun had come up that day, Grady was at Katie’s side of the car even before it stopped. He opened the door for his daughter.

“Hi, Daddy. Was that Mr. King that we saw leaving?” she asked as she gave her dad a hug.

“Sure was. Guess what? Jack is coming home,” he told her.

“Yeah, I know,” she replied.

“No, he’s coming home tomorrow,” Grady added.

“Tomorrow? But we’re not ready for him yet,” Katie answered.

“I know, but Mr. King is going to transport his remains over to the mortuary tomorrow morning so they can put him in a casket and do whatever else they can do for him. Then we can have the services here in a few days,” Grady told her.

“Well, that’s better. I mean, it gives a little more time to get this all done, but not that much,” Katie told him.

“True, but there’s something else that Mr. King said that has me wondering,” Grady said in a very cautious tone.

“And what was that?” she asked.

“He said that he had a very big surprise coming,” he told her.

“A very big surprise? What did he mean by that?” she asked.

“Not sure. He said that he couldn’t tell me anymore. But you and I were in for a surprise of a lifetime,” he told her.

“Well, considering we just found the stolen treasure of the south, and I’m getting married in a few weeks, and now we found out that Jack is finally coming home, it would have to be really huge to top all of that,” she told him.

“I know, I know, and that, my dear daughter, is what’s so scary,” Grady told her as he rubbed his chin.

“Well, I guess we’ll find out in a few days then. But I have to tell ya about this story about my great-grandpa that I just heard. It’s a whole different side of him that the history books don’t tell ya,” she told him.

“Really? You grab the ice tea, and I’ll meet you on the front porch ‘cause I have a surprise for you as well,” he told her.

“Oh, yeah, that sign thing. I saw it when we came through the gate, but why is it still covered up?” she asked.

“That, my dear Katie, is the surprise part,” he told her.

“Really?” she told him.

“Yes, really,” he said with a smile. “So as soon as Michael gets here, I’ll show it to you. Now go get the tea please, and I’ll meet you on the porch so you can tell me about your great-grandfather’s story,” he told her.

“Well, okay, you’ve got to hear this,” she told him as she and Melissa headed for the kitchen to fetch the tea.

“So tell me, what did you think of our dress lady?” Melissa asked as she pulled three glasses from the cupboard.

“I thought that she was a very unique lady,” Katie told her.

“Just wait until you see our dresses. You’ll be pleasantly surprised,” Melissa told her.

“I’m sure that I will be,” she answered back.

Katie carried the pitcher of tea as Melissa carried the tray of glasses. They poured the tea into the glasses and took their seats. Katie started to tell

Grady about the story that she had heard.

So as Grady slowly drank his tea, Katie told him what the old lady had told her word for word. She could tell that Grady was totally interested in the story.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked as she finished the story.

“You know, ever since you were a little girl, you were always doing things that nobody else ever thought of. Just like dropping the charges against Susie. I never knew where you inherited that from. And now I know, you got it from him,” Grady told her.

“Gee, you think so? I never made the connection between me and him before. You know, sometimes I wonder what he was like,” she told him.

“Well, Katie, I would think that he was pretty much like you, caring about the innocent, loving the unlovable, and always doing the impossible. I think that he would approve of you and the things that you do. I’m sorry that you never had a chance to meet him,” he told her.

“God, Grady, you almost had me crying,” Melissa told him.

“Sorry, dear, that’s not what I was trying to do,” he told her.

“I know, but still it was a very touching moment,” she answered.

“I know because he made me cry. Look at these tears,” Katie told them as she wiped several tears from her cheek.

“Well, I know that Jack loved you very much. I don’t know if you remember much about your uncle, but he was kind of like you and your Grandpa Sherman. He used to come over and play with you all the time. I remember you asking him for ponyback rides. And he would run all over the yard with you on his back. And you know, I can’t recall him ever getting tired. As long as you wanted to play, he would keep on going. Of course, that was when your mother was still here. She and Jack were the very best of friends. God, I miss both of them so much,” Grady said as he tried to wipe the tears from his eye.

“Daddy, I do believe that you’ve made yourself cry,” Katie told him.

“Yeah, well, with you getting married and Jack coming home after all of these years, I guess it gets to be too much all at once, even for me,” he told her.

“Well, in a few days, Jack will be here, and things will start to simmer down, I hope,” she told him.

“You hope? What else could possibly happen next?” Grady asked.

“Daddy, you shouldn’t be asking questions when you really don’t want to hear the answers,” she told him.

“Yeah, I know, but sometimes, the mouth acts faster than the brain does,” he answered.

“Tell me about it. Like I’ve never been there before,” she said with a smile.

“Oh, I could think of a couple of times where that happened to me as well,” Melissa added.

“Melissa darling, you really need to speak up more often. I almost forgot that you were even there,” Grady told her as he leaned over and tapped the top of her knee.

“Oh, I was just listening to the two of you talking, is all. It was a very touching and somewhat personal conversation, so I just sat back and listened,” she answered.

Katie and Melissa both stood up as Rick’s car pulled into the driveway. They were there to meet it as it pulled up to a stop. Katie was at Mike’s door as Melissa was at Rick’s. Both of them greeted their men with hugs and kisses.

Grady, still sitting up on the porch, just watched. He was taken back to a time when his beloved wife, Katherine, used to meet him just as those two women had. He could still smell her perfume, feel the silkiness of her hair, and hear the sound of that sweet, tender voice of hers. And once again, just as it had been happening more often lately, he realized that he truly missed her. Katherine would, without a doubt, be happy for her daughter—for his daughter, the only thing that he had left in the world. And he knew in his

heart that she too was being pulled away from him. Slowly but surely, but it was okay. He knew that the two of them truly loved each other. She would soon have a family of her own that would need tending to. Yes, she would make a great mother for sure. But that would be in the future. And right now, he had something special to do. So as he slowly walked toward the car, Mike turned to greet him.

“Grady? How ya doing today?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m fine. Just talking to Katie about the past and brought up some old memories that I hadn’t thought about for a long time. Kind of got to me, is all. And you? How was work?” he asked.

“Same old stuff. I guess that’s why they call it work. I guess if people enjoyed it so much, we would have another name for it,” he answered.

“True, but I need to get everyone down by the gate. I have a surprise for Katie. So could you help me? Please,” he asked.

“Sure, no problem,” Mike said as he turned toward Rick and his sister. “Hey, guys, Grady needs us all down by the gate. He has something to show Katie.” And without hesitation, everyone started walking toward the gate. When they got to where the large sign was, everyone stopped. Grady asked the two guys to pull off the canvas tarp when he gave them the signal. They both agreed.

He turned to look at his daughter. “Katie sweetheart, I know how much your great-grandfather means to you, and your dedication to him is inspiring to say the least. So to let everyone else that happens to come through that gate know how much it means to you, I decided to give you this little sign to show your devotion to your family,” Grady said as he signaled the two men to pull off the tarp.

When Katie first saw the sign, she was speechless as she read it. The sign itself was big. No, it was huge. At almost ten feet long and nearly six feet tall, it would be almost impossible to miss as you entered the main gate. Hand carved, this solid piece of oak was impressive to say the least. Grady had half expected it to take a few months to make it, but the guys at the National Parks Service must have worked on it day and night to have it finished in less than a week and a half.

Katie read it again.

## The General Sherman Memorial Park

“The Truth Is Worth Searching For

No Matter How Long It Takes.”

Donated by his great-granddaughter

Katie Windslow and Family

Katie could feel the tears of joy building up within her. Grady just watched her with the anticipation of what was sure to come. Mike walked up to Katie and put his arm around her.

“Wow, now that’s one heck of a sign,” he told her.

“I know. It’s amazing. I can’t believe that my daddy did this,” she said as she threw her head on to his shoulder and started bawling like a little kid. Mike looked over at Grady.

“I do believe that she likes the sign,” he said as he patted her on the back.

Katie lifted up her head. “I don’t like the sign—I love it,” she said as she pulled herself away from Mike’s shoulder. She walked over to her dad and threw her arms around his neck and gave him a great big hug.

“Thank you, Daddy. It’s great. I can’t believe that you did this. And I didn’t know about it,” she told him.

“Well, honey, that’s why they call it a surprise,” he said as he gently kissed the top of her head.

“Grady, I do think that you’ve outdone yourself again,” Melissa told him. “Very nice,” she added

“Yeah, well, when it comes to my daughter, it’s all or nothing,” he told her.

“Well, you wouldn’t be looking to adopt another daughter anytime soon, would ya?” she asked jokingly.

“But, Melissa my dear, I already have two of them,” he told her.

“Two? How did you come up with two daughters?” she asked.

“Well, according to my Katie here, you’re like the sister that she never had. So if you’re a sister to Katie, doesn’t that make you my daughter as well?” he asked.

“Great! I’m getting a new husband and another dad. A girl can’t get any luckier than that I guess,” she told him.

“Welcome to the family, daughter,” he said as he threw her a smile.

The five of them just stood there marveling over the giant sign. It was after all a very fitting tribute to Katie’s undying devotion to a man that she had never met, her great-grandfather General William Tecumseh Sherman. Love truly knew no limitations when it came to the passing of time. They all knew it, and now everyone that read that sign would know it too.

As they slowly made their way back to the house, Katie found herself looking over her shoulder more than a few times at that marvelous sign. She just couldn’t get it out of her head.

As they sat around the dining room table, the conversation soon turned to talking about Jack and his coming home finally.

“So your brother, Jack, is finally coming home. I bet you’re excited, are ya?” Rick asked.

“Am I glad to have him home? You bet. But I wish that it was under different circumstances. Jack and I were pretty close. Well, as close as two brothers could be, I guess.” Grady answered.

“Didn’t Jack have a girlfriend or a wife?” Melissa asked.

“Well, there was a girl—Elizabeth. But they broke up then got back together, so they break up again more times than I could ever shake a stick at. But Jack could pick ’em, that’s for sure. Talkin’ about a looker. Gee, almighty, that lady could walk into any room, and it would go deathly quiet. She had this walk that she would do to get your attention, and lordy, did she know how to use it to her advantage. That’s how Jack met her. Or how she

hooked Jack, depending on which side of the fence that you were on,” he told her.

“Sounds like all of you were pretty close,” Mike added.

“Yeah, the four of us. Hell, we got into more scuffs just defending our ladies than you would think possible. Jack and I didn’t have to drink back then to get into a fight. Hell, the ladies started most of the fights for us. Elizabeth would do her walk while Katherine would smile at some poor fool, and the fight was on. Of course, it was nice when we got home because then the ladies would pamper us as they tended to our cuts and bruises. Aw, the good ole days,” Grady told them with a smile.

“Sounds like you all were a pretty wild bunch back in your day,” Melissa added.

“Naw, but we certainly had our moments. I think we were more like the crazy bunch. We’d do things that were just plumb crazy. It’s a miracle none of us ever got killed,” he told them.

There was complete silence. Then Grady thought about what he had said. “Gee I guess two of us went ahead and did just that, didn’t they?” There was a long pause of silence. “If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go on up to bed now. I’m not feeling well. You kids have fun. I’ll see ya all in the morning,” he said as he slowly got up and walked out of the room.

The room remained quiet for the longest time.

“You think my daddy will be all right?” Katie asked them.

“Honey, he’ll be fine. He just brought up a lot of old memories, is all,” Melissa told her as she reached across the table and squeezed her hand.

“Yeah, your dad is one tuff bird. He’ll be fine in the morning. You’ll see,” Mike said as he hugged her.

“God, I hope so. If anything ever happened to him, I don’t know what I would do. He’s my whole life. Well, except for you all I mean,” Katie said as she slowly wiped the tears from her cheek.

“Honey, we all know what you meant. It’s okay, and so will your daddy be. Just let him get some sleep, and he’ll be fit as rain come tomorrow

morning,” Mike told her.

The four of them sat around the table until about midnight. Their talk pretty much consisted of a bunch of nonsense gibber-gabble, but it turned serious when the topic of their wedding vows got brought up. Together, the four of them laid out a very loose format at best. But still, it was a start, which was more than they had before.

After saying good night to her guests, Katie turned out the lights and headed upstairs. She quietly pushed the door to her daddy’s room open and saw that he was fast asleep. She felt better as she slowly pulled the door close.

No rooster in the world could have awakened Katie before she was ready to get up. She yawned as she pulled the blankets up around her neck. She was as comfy as a flea on a very shaggy sheepdog. And even though her eyes were closed, she wasn’t asleep. In fact, she was very much awake, but she was listening, listening to the sounds of a very large empty house, listening to the sounds of her daddy banging stuff in the kitchen just as he did every morning. But today was different. He wasn’t banging anything. In fact, she didn’t hear him at all. She sat up in bed and listened. Nothing. No tea kettle, no slamming of a screen door—there was nothing. Grabbing her robe and flinging it over her shoulders, she walked down the hallway. Her daddy’s door was still shut.

She slowly pushed it open. There he was in the same position that he had been last night. She slowly made her way down the stairs and into the kitchen. As she started filling the tea kettle to make some coffee, she thought to herself, *God, the morning sun is awfully bright for this early in the morning.* She glanced over at the clock. She had to take a second and third look to make sure her eyes weren’t playing tricks on her. It was a little past one in the afternoon.

“No way, I couldn’t have slept that long,” she said out loud to herself. Okay, wait a second. Maybe she had because she was up really late last night. But for her daddy to sleep this long, it just never happened—ever. So she waited for the coffee water to boil and poured some into a cup. *Daddy*

*has to have his coffee first thing in the morning, or in the afternoon in this case.*

She slowly pushed his door open and walked into his room.

“Come on, sleepyhead, the day a wastin’,” she said but got no response.

“Daddy, come on. I’ve got your coffee here,” she said as she shook him. But there still wasn’t a response.

“Daddy, wake up. This isn’t funny,” she said as she shook him feverishly. Still no response.

“Oh God, no. Please not now, please. Daddy, wake up,” she said as she slapped the side of his face.

Grady’s eyes flew open.

“Daddy, you’re alive!” she said as she hugged him.

“Well, of course I am. What in the hell are you doing hitting me. Damn, Katie, that hurt,” he told her.

“But you wouldn’t wake up. I thought that you were—”

“Dead?” Grady said as he rolled back over, pulling up the covers over his shoulders.

“Yeah, I thought you were dead all right. But get your butt up. We have things to do today, and we’ve already slept through half of the day,” she told him.

“You go ahead. I’m staying right here,” he told her.

“Like hell you are. You have to go help with the arrangements for Jack. Oh, I see this is all about what you said last night, isn’t it?” she asked him.

But he didn’t answer her.

“It is, isn’t it. Well, if you think for one second I’m going to let you lie in this bed and feel sorry for yourself because you’re alive and they’re not, you’re mistaken. I would think that Jack would mean more to you than this,” she told him.

Grady rolled back over and sat up. “Don’t you ever say that I don’t care for my brother. That’s just downright mean. And I didn’t raise you to talk to me like that!” he yelled at her.

“Well, you’re acting like a child. If you want to mope around and feel sorry for yourself, you can find somewhere else to do it,” she told him.

“I’m fine right where I’m at,” he told her as he lay back down, pulling the covers with him as he rolled away from her.

“Fine. But just remember this, Mom and Jack are staring down at you, and they’re disappointed to see you acting this way. You’re better than this,” she told him as she turned to leave.

Grady sat up, and tears were flowing down his cheeks like raging rivers of emotions. “But I miss them . . . and it should have been my turn, not your mother’s,” he said as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

Katie ran to her daddy’s side and threw her arms around him. “I miss them too, Daddy. But God called them, and not you, to heaven. And as much as it hurts, we have to go on with our lives, remember?” she told him.

He pulled away from her and stared at her. “Did you memorize that from somewhere?” he asked even though he knew the answer.

“You know that I did. That’s what you told me when Mom died, remember? So come on, get dressed. We have things to do,” she told him as she kissed him on the cheek.

“I’m sorry for acting that way,” he told her.

“It’s all right. It will be our little secret, okay?” she told him.

“Okay, and one more thing,” he said as he watched her stop to turn to face him.

“And what’s that?” she asked.

“You can yell at me all you want to. But my cheek still stings. Never again, okay?” he asked.

“Okay, as long as you promise never to play dead again,” she said with a smile as she left his room.

“I wasn’t playing dead. I was friggin’ sleeping!” he yelled to her as she turned to walk away.

“Yeah, well, you could have fooled me!” she yelled back to him without even turning around.

Grady slowly made his way down the stairs. And even though it was past one in the afternoon, he felt tired. Oh, he had gotten plenty of sleep, but bad dreams can make even the best sleep worthless. And he had some pretty bad dreams, that’s for sure. Reliving Katherine’s death over and over, the smoke and the heat of the flames all seemed so real. He wouldn’t be one bit surprised to find soot on his face. It had been that real. But he knew that it hadn’t been real, at least not last night it wasn’t. Back on the night of the fire, it had been all too real. A night that would change their lives forever.

He walked right past Katie and made himself another cup of coffee. He sat down across from her. He started rubbing the side of his face where she had slapped him. Finally she noticed what he was doing.

“Oh, Daddy, you’re getting a bit carried away, aren’t you? I didn’t slap you that hard,” she told him.

“Hey, it was my cheek. I should know, right?” he answered.

“Well, if you ever scare the hell out of me like that ever again, you’ll be rubbing a lot more than just a cheek. And by the way, I do love ya, you know?” she asked as she went back to the morning paper.

“Yeah, I know. Ya sure have a funny way of showing your affections though. I feel sorry for Michael,” he told her.

“I’m sure he’ll get his just as you got yours. Might take a little time, but he’ll get the message sure enough,” she answered back as she turned to the next page of the paper.

“Should I warn him?” he asked.

“And what? Take all of the fun out of it? Naw, I like surprises,” she answered.

“Hey, speakin’ of surprises. I had some pretty bad dreams last night, and there’s something to be said about dreams. Don’t you think it’s odd that

both Jack and your mom may have died within weeks of each other? Maybe even days,” he asked.

“What? And where did you come up with this brainstorm. You don’t even know when Jack got killed. Quit trying to find someone or something to put the blame on. It was nothing more than a tragic accident and leave it at that,” she insisted.

“May 10, 1945,” he told her as if he knew the date like his own birthday.

Katie just looked at him. “May 10? How did you come up with that exact date?” she asked.

“In my dream last night. That date kept flashing as I relived the night of the fire,” he told her.

“Really? That’s only a week before the fire. This is creepy. Are you sure it doesn’t mean something else? After all, the chances of the two somehow being tied to each other is a stretch to the imagination, to say the least,” she said as she closed the newspaper and looked at him.

“What else could it mean? Come on, Katie, think about it,” he told her.

“I am. But what possible connection could the two deaths have in common, and why her?” she asked.

“Hell, I don’t know. This might be a dead end, but then again, it could be the answer that we’ve both been looking for. At least you can do is agree to check it out,” he told her.

“No, you check it out. You can call Mr. King and see if he has a date of Jack’s murder. And then we’ll start diggin’, but only if what you say is true. Okay? You make the call, and you ask the questions. I have Jack’s services to set up. Okay?” she asked.

“Okay, fair enough,” he told her. “But I do need your help, you know, with that whatchamacallit,” he told her.

“You mean the telephone, right? Look, just pick up the part that goes against your ear, crank the dial a few turns, and when the operator comes

on, just give her the number that you want her to connect you with. I can't see it ever getting easier than that," she explained.

"Yeah, the new age of wonderful inventions. I'm still hooked on the Pony Express concept myself," he explained.

"You're living in yesterday. The world is changing. And either you change with it or you'll get left behind," she told him.

"Yeah, I know. Hell, I'm not even used to inside toilets yet. I can still remember the smell of those outhouses back in the summertime. You either had to go real bad or you had to be a man and go in there and get the job done. Like a man," he told her.

"Eeewww! Daddy, that's sick. Just plain sick. Outhouses are nasty, dirty, and downright disgusting," she explained.

"Hey, when you've got to go, you go," he told her.

"Can we talk about something else please? Even your vomit stories are better than your tales of the outhouse," she explained.

"Hey, when you have as few memories of your upbringing as I do, you go with what you've got. That's the way that I figure it anyways," he told her.

"Great, your only memories of your childhood are vomiting and outhouses. God, I hate to hear the stories that you'll be telling your grandkids. Lord, have mercy," she said.

"Yeah, I could tell them that I got drunk, went to vomit in the outhouse, but I was too damn drunk to realize that they moved it. So I fell in this hole, you see. And I was up to here in—" Katie cut him off.

"You hadn't better be telling your grandkids stories like that. Daddy, you'll be giving them nightmares fer sure," she told him.

"Yeah, well then, I guess I'll just have to lie to them and make some shit up then," he said jokingly.

"You're not going to be lyin' to your grandkids either. God, Daddy, what kind of grandfather do you expect to be anyways?" she asked.

“Just one that loves his family, that’s all,” he finally confessed.

“Well, that’s more like it. I can deal with that. Now go get dressed. We have to go and make arrangements for Jack,” she told.

“Yeah, I’ve better hurry too. You might start slapping me again,” he said and stood up. Katie threw the newspaper at him. “See? Resorting to violence already,” he said half laughing as he left the dining room and headed for the stairs.

“You’re darn lucky I didn’t have a skillet or a rolling pin in my hand!” she yelled back at him.

Getting dressed was the easy part. Knowing that he was going to go and sign for his brother’s remains sure as hell wasn’t going to be easy at all. Not for him and especially not for Katie. She would most certainly take it hard.

Neither of them spoke much as they drove to the funeral home, a quiet little red brick building that did what? Nothing really, just got those dearly departed loved ones all prettied up with cheap makeup and shove them into a nice cushioned, overpriced coffin and arrange to have them buried at the cemetery of your choosing. That would leave the remaining family members free to bicker and fight over the dearly departed’s estate. Nice business, but not too many return customers, Grady figured. And that awful music. That alone could drive you into going out and killing some poor unsuspecting son of bitch. *But maybe, just maybe, it was to draw in more customers? Yeah, maybe,* he thought to himself. *But then again, maybe not.*

As Grady and Katie walked into the waiting room, they both looked at each other.

“This place gives me the creeps,” Katie said in a low whisper.

“I know. Me too. Let’s do what we came here to do and get out of here,” he told her.

Katie simply shook her head in agreement. Grady went over and started looking at the coffins that were on display.

“I kind of like this one, but there’s no place for my pipe,” he said laughing.

But Katie hadn't heard him. She was going through a folder of floral arrangements that were being offered by some local florist. She studied several pictures of some really rather spectacular floral designs when she turned to see what her dad was doing. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Daddy, where are you?" she said as quietly as she could.

But there was no response. She walked over to where she had last seen him. He wasn't there.

"Daddy, come on . . . here are you?" she asked again.

"Ya know this is rather nice. I could lay here just like this for all eternity," Grady said.

Katie turned in the direction of his voice only to find him lying in an open casket with his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes closed. At first, Katie was shocked to see him like that. Then her compulsive instincts took over.

"Get your butt out of there!" she looked around to see if anyone was coming. "You can't do that! Get up," she told him.

"What? Why can't I try it out? You try on shoes before you buy them, don't ya? Same thing. But this is mighty comfy, I do have to admit that," he told her, still lying in the open casket.

"Daddy, do you remember what I told you I'd do if you ever played dead again? Well, you're doing it now. Get up," she told him as a man walked into the room. Grady just lay there.

"Excuse me, miss, may I help you?" he asked as he walked across the floor to meet her. Katie rushed over to meet him.

"Yes, sir, I'm here to sign for my uncle's body. His name is Jack Windslow," she told him as she tried to keep him from seeing Grady in the coffin.

"Oh, yes, Mr. King told me to expect you. I'm so sorry for your loss, miss. Your name is Katie, isn't it?" he asked.

"Why, yes, I am. Did Mr. King tell you that, or did you just guess?" she asked, trying to give her dad enough time to get out of the coffin without

being seen.

“Actually, your uncle told me,” he told her.

Katie turned all of her attention back to the man standing before her. “Excuse me, but did you say that my uncle told you my name?” she asked.

“Yes, I did, but I should explain. I guess your uncle has been dead a long time, and I don’t want to get too graphic as to the details, but honestly, there’s not much left of him, considering the time in the ground and all. But in his wallet, what was left of it anyways, there’s this picture. A picture of you with your name written on the back of it. And surprisingly, it’s the only thing that came through this and can still be read. It’s like someone put your picture in his wallet maybe a month or so ago. It’s really bizarre, the condition of your picture I mean. You’re much younger in that picture, but it’s you. There’s not much doubt about it,” he explained to her.

“My picture? That’s all that there is?” she asked.

“Well, you have to understand what happens when a body is buried. It’s not real pretty,” he told her.

“Well, you can spare me the details if you don’t mind,” she told him.

“Of course, I’m sorry. And there is his other personal effects. Like some jewelry and rings,” he told her.

“Rings? May I see them?” she asked.

“Certainly, just follow me into the office, and I’ll get them for ya,” he told her. As Katie followed him, she waved to her dad to get out of the coffin.

Katie took a seat in the office and waited as the man went to retrieve Jack’s effects. Still there was no sign of her dad.

As the man returned, he handed her a small box with Jack’s name on it. She just stared at it for the longest time. It was hard to open the little box. By opening it, she would soon see the only personal effects that her uncle still owned in the entire world. And even though he was gone, these were still very much his. Katie was just opening the box when the sounds of a

woman screaming filled the air, followed by several large bangs and crashes. Then it was quiet again.

“Daddy!” she yelled as she followed the man from the room and back into the waiting room. There on the floor was an elderly lady who had apparently fainted for some unknown reason, and as she fell to the floor, she must have knocked the display of coffins off of their stands. Coffins were everywhere. The only remaining coffin that was still on its stand was the one that Grady had been in. Katie looked, and it was empty.

Grady came into the room from behind the curtain.

“What happened?” he asked as he looked at Katie. She knew what had happened. It wouldn’t take a rocket scientist to figure this one out.

“Oh, a lady fainted, is all. It happens all the time. She’ll be all right,” the man told her as he tried to help the lady back to her feet. She was dazed, but she seemed to be okay. She turned to see Grady, screamed, and fainted again.

“What? I didn’t do anything. I swear,” Grady swore to them.

Katie just threw him an evil look that told him straight up that she didn’t believe him. Just then, two more workers came in to see what all of the commotion was about.

“Good! David, Lester, would you please be so kind as to take this woman outside for some fresh air. I guess death is a hard thing to handle. I have to finish up with the Windslows. It shouldn’t take very much longer,” he told them.

“Sure, boss,” one of the guys told him as they started to help the poor lady to her feet. Grady tried to stay out of eyesight of the timid lady.

The three of them went back into the office.

“Okay, where were we?” the man asked.

“I need to explain about what happened out there,” Katie told him.

“Oh, no need. We see that all the time,” he told her.

“No, but my father was—” Katie tried to explain, but the man cut her off.

“Please, miss, if we can get back to the matters at hand,” he asked her.

Katie just looked over at Grady. He got the message loud and clear. Katie looked down at the box that she still held in her hands.

“What’s in the box?” Grady asked.

Katie looked at him again. “Jack’s personal effects,” she answered.

“Really? Aren’t you going to open it?” he asked her.

“Well, I want to, but these are Jack’s things. They’re all we have left of him,” she told him.

“Well, no, right now all we have is a small brown box. We don’t even know what’s in it yet, and until you do open it, we never will. Go ahead open the box, sweetheart,” Grady told her.

Slowly, she lifted the lid off of the box. She just stared down at it.

“What is it, dear?” her daddy asked.

Katie slowly lifted out the picture of her, the one that the gentleman had told her about. It was in fact her picture taken sometime back when she was maybe ten or so. Tears swelled up in her eyes as she flipped it over. Written on the back of it, though it was somewhat hard to make out, was “To my favorite uncle, with love your favorite niece, Katie.”

Katie could remember writing it and even the moment that she had given it to Jack, but she couldn’t put a date to it. More tears started to build up, but she wasn’t crying yet. Katie handed the picture to her dad.

“This is back when you were in the fifth or sixth grade. I remember this. Your mother took this picture at Easter time. Remember?” he asked her.

Okay, now she was crying. Wave after wave of tears ran down her cheeks. The man handed her a tissue, then another, then another. Finally, he handed her the entire box of tissues.

“Thank you,” she told him as she tried to wipe away the onslaught of tears.

“You’re welcome. If you need more, we have plenty,” he told her.

“Sorry about that, dear. I wasn’t thinking,” her daddy told her.

“It’s all right, and yes, I do remember it now,” she told him as she glanced down at the rings at the bottom of the box, half buried under what used to be Jack’s billfold.

“These rings need to stay with Jack,” she told them.

“Are you sure that’s what you want to do, dear?” Grady asked her.

“They’re his. They should stay with him,” she told him.

“I understand that, but in ten years or so, when you’re trying to tell your kids about him, what will you show them, dear? We don’t even have a decent picture of him, not since the fire. So you decide what you want to do here. But I know that at least one of those rings aren’t going back to Jack. There should be one that belonged to our grandfather. I want that one,” he told her.

“You know what? You’re right. These are all that we have left of him. We need to keep them,” she said as she started crying again.

“I’ll get some more tissues,” the man said as he stood up and walked over to the cabinet and got another box.

“Is there anything else you’ll be needing from us? I really need to get her out of here,” Grady asked.

“Just your choice of casket. We have a wide selection to choose from —” Grady cut him off.

“Any one you choose except for the rose-colored one. It looks too much like my wife’s,” Grady told him as Katie started crying again.

“Yes, sir, we’ll be delivering him to your place just as Mr. King had instructed us, and don’t worry about paying for it. It’s all been taken care of. Courtesy of Uncle Sam, you know. But I do agree with you. You’ll need to

get her out of here. This place has a bad habit of getting to most people, sooner or later,” he told him.

“I can understand that,” Grady said as he helped his daughter back to her feet. With the small box tucked neatly under his arm, they made their way back into the showroom. As Grady turned to open the door that led outside, he came face-to-face with the elderly lady who had fainted twice before. Again their faces were mere inches from each other’s. And just like last time, she fainted. Again.

Once Katie got outside and into some fresh air, she was a lot better. But she decided to let Grady drive them home.

About halfway home, Katie looked over at her dad. “So are you going to tell me what happened with that old lady or what?” she asked him.

“Do you really want to know? I mean, really?” he asked.

“Yeah, I really do,” she answered.

“Okay, fine. I was lying there you see, with my eyes closed and my arms crossed across my chest. I wasn’t asleep, close maybe, but not totally asleep. Anyways, I got this weird sensation that someone was looking at me. So I opened my eyes, and this lady was close enough like she was going to kiss me or something. Anyways, she screamed! I screamed and sat up. Ramming my lips against her. And for a mere second, if that long, we were like lip to lip, staring at each other, and then she fainted. So I tried to get out of the coffin to help her, but I slipped and landed on the coffin next to us. It went crashing into the next one and so on and so on. I didn’t know what to do, so I jumped behind the curtain and waited for you guys. The rest you already know,” he told her

Katie busted out laughing. “You actually kissed her on the lips?” she asked.

“Not on purpose,” Grady said in his defense.

“No wonder the poor lady fainted three times. You could have given her a heart attack,” she told him.

“Her? What about me? I could have had a heart attack too, you know. And just what was she going to do if I hadn’t opened my eyes?” he asked.

“This is some funny stuff. Just wait until I tell Mike and Melissa about this,” she said as she continued laughing.

“You wouldn’t! Come on, Katie, have a heart,” he told her.

“Not a chance. Serves you right anyways for playing in a coffin. I mean, really,” she said laughing.

“I wasn’t playing. I was testing it. There is a difference you know,” he told her.

“Oh, I’m sorry. If you were playing, you would have gotten a hug too, is that it?” she said as she started laughing again.

“You go ahead and laugh. Your turn is coming. You just wait. You’ll see,” he told her with a very devilish grin across his face. “You’ll see.”

Well, later on that afternoon, as Katie, Mike, Melissa, and Rick sat around the table, Katie unspun the tale that had them holding their guts and rolling on the floor. And with precision timing, as always Grady walked into the room. Everyone tried to hide their laughter. None of them did a very good job.

“Oh, so I see my sweet innocent daughter just couldn’t wait to tell ya all,” he said as he threw Katie a somewhat dirty look.

“You scared an old lady into fainting?” Mike asked him.

“Three times he made her faint mind you, not just once—three times in under ten minutes,” Katie added.

“And you kissed her on the lips? God, Grady, if you wanted a kiss that bad, I would have kissed ya,” Melissa said as she continued laughing.

“You guys go ahead and laugh now ’cause your turn is coming. Ya all might want to be a little more like Rick here. You hasn’t said anything,” he told them.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know you like we do, not yet anyways,” Melissa added.

“All right, guys, it isn’t all that funny seriously. But I do have to ask you one serious question, Grady. If I may?” Rick asked.

“Now, see there’s a man with manners. Go ahead, Rick, what’s your question?” Grady asked.

“When is it?” he asked.

“When is what? See? If you ask a serious question, you’ll get a serious answer,” he told them as he turned to look at Rick.

“Your second date? You’ve already kissed her on the first one,” he asked. Everyone started laughing again.

“Ya all can go to hell,” Grady told them as he left the room.

“Daddy, don’t leave. We’re just getting started,” Katie yelled to him, but he didn’t answer back.

“Party pooper!” yelled Melissa.

“Yeah, come on, Grady, we’re just teasin’ ya!” Rick yelled to him. He got no response either.

“I wish that I could have been there to see that. It’s damn near funnier than you and your damn sex-in-a-hoop-skirt story,” Melissa told Katie.

Mike just looked at Katie. “You told her what we were doing?” he asked.

“Well, it’s not like we could have been doing much of anything else. Or trying too at least,” she told him.

“Yeah, well, now everyone knows for certain,” Mike answered.

“Are you implying that I go around repeating rumors?” Melissa asked in a very firm tone.

“Nope, nothing was said about you repeating rumors. I just said that you’re not very good at keeping secrets, that’s all,” he answered.

“Oh really?” she asked.

“All right, you two, enough is enough already. Besides, it really doesn’t matter much anyways. We have no secrets between us four anyways.

Right?” Katie asked.

Everyone at the table agreed with Katie.

“She’s right. After everything that we’ve been through in the past few weeks, it makes for a special sort of bond, doesn’t it?” Melissa asked them.

“Yeah, I guess so, but there’s certain things that happens between a guy and his girl that just isn’t anyone else’s business. That’s all,” Mike told them.

“Okay fine. For those so-called personal things, as you call them, those are off-limits then. Okay? And I’m sorry for telling your sister about our little barn escapade, okay?” Katie asked.

“Great. So now what do we talk about?” he asked.

“Well, we could talk about you and Katie in the movie house or how that cop caught you necking on the sidewalk,” Melissa replied.

“Katie?” he said in a very loud and stern voice.

“What? Okay the rule applies to those too. Gee, I can’t brag about nothing,” she told him with a smile.

“Bragging is one thing, but hell, you go into details,” he told her.

“You should be glad she didn’t have a camera,” Melissa added.

“Really, we would be on the cover of *Look Magazine* or somewhere like that,” Mike responded.

Grady walked back into the room. He just stood there staring off into space. He had a look of total devastation across his face.

“Daddy, what is it?” Katie asked.

Grady just stood there. Tears were flowing down his cheek as he turned to look at his daughter.

“Daddy? What’s wrong?” she asked as she got up and walked over to her dad. “Come on over here and sit down. You don’t look very well. What’s wrong?” she asked as he helped him into a chair at the table.

Suddenly the telephone rang.

“Michael would you get that please?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said as he got up and went to answer it.

“Daddy, what’s wrong? Come on, we don’t keep secrets, you and I. Whatever bothers you bothers me, remember?” Katie told him.

Mike came back into the room. “That was Paul King. He’s on his way over,” he told her.

“Paul King? You called him didn’t you? What did he tell you? Daddy, answer me,” she demanded.

“I can’t . . . tell ya,” Grady said in a very low and weak voice.

“You were right, weren’t you?” she asked him. Grady turned away from her. He didn’t want her to read the hurt in his face.

“Katie, would you please tell us what this is all about?” Melissa asked her.

Katie turned and looked at her friends. They were all eager to help, but they didn’t know what this was all about.

“Okay, it was May 17, 1945, just another normal Friday evening in Mobile, Alabama. Daddy had a few errands to run, so I tagged along with him just like I always did. We weren’t gone more than an hour, but when we returned home, we found our house fully engulfed in flames. The fire brigade did everything that they could do to save it, but they couldn’t. We lost everything. Especially my mom in that terrible fire that night,” she told them.

“Oh my world, that’s terrible!” Rick told her.

“I knew that your mom had died, but I never thought about how,” Mike said as he reached out and took Katie’s hand.

“We’re really sorry, Katie, but how does that tie into Paul King?” Melissa asked.

“Last night, daddy had a dream. And in that dream, he saw the date of Jack’s murder. May 10, 1945. Daddy told me that there was a connection between the two. I told him he was just looking for someone to blame it on.

After all, we have always thought that it was just an accident. Anyways, I told Daddy to call Jack King and see if he could confirm that date. I mean, Barnes was singing, right? Maybe he would fill in the gaps,” she told them.

“And from the look on your daddy’s face, I’d say that he confirmed the dates?” Michael asked.

“I think he might have confirmed more than just the date of Jack’s murder. Ain’t that right, Daddy?” she asked as she threw her arms around his neck.

“Well, I guess if Mr. King is coming, I guess I should go put on some coffee then. That man does like his coffee,” Melissa said as she headed for the kitchen.

“Thanks, Mel, he’ll appreciate that for sure,” Katie told her as she got up from the table. Her attention returned to her daddy. “I’ve never seen him this way before. It’s scaring me. Daddy, please talk to me. Please, Daddy, please,” she said pleading to her daddy. But Grady just sat there, staring off into empty space.

“Katie, I don’t mean to alarm you, but maybe you should call a doctor. I think your dad might need one,” Rick suggested to her.

Katie looked over at him. “Yes, I agree, but let’s wait for Mr. King, then we’ll call.” Katie replied.

“Yeah, he’ll know what to do,” Rick answered.

# A Ten-Year-Old Mystery

So for the next forty-five minutes, they all paced back and forth. Grady however didn't improve much, but he hadn't gotten any worse either, and that was a good thing.

Katie had heard the car pull up and was standing in the open, doorway waiting to greet Mr. King. There was another person with him, a lady. A very tall and slender lady at that, Katie noted.

"Mr. King, you have to help Daddy. Something just isn't right. Just look at him staring off into space like he is," Katie told him.

"We'll help him, Katie, just relax. I brought this lady friend of mine for him," Mr. King explained. "She's a doctor," he added.

"Great, you brought a doctor with you," she turned to face the doctor. "Can you help him?" she asked.

"Well, Paul, or I should say Mr. King, here told me what happened. And frankly, there's not that much I can do. We'll give him a sedative to help him sleep, but it's up to him more or less as to his recovery," she explained.

"Can you explain that more in plain old English?" Katie asked her.

"Sure. When a person, such as your father, receives trauma like really bad news in your father's case, they shut themselves down, so to speak. Nothing goes in. Nothing goes out. It's his body's way of protecting itself you see," she explained.

"So is he going to get better? I mean, he isn't going to be like this forever, is he?" Katie asked, not really wanting to know the answer.

"Unfortunately, you can never tell. We'll leave him here tonight, but if he doesn't snap out of it on his own, we may be forced into submitting him into a hospital so he can get the help that he'll need," she told her as she glanced over at Grady.

“I see, so it’s more or less all up to him then,” Katie said in a tone that didn’t sound so promising.

“Relax, dear, I’ve seen people like your father simply wake up the next day and never realize that was a problem at all. Your father might do that too, but then again, he might not. Time will tell,” she told her.

Katie turned to face Mr. King.

“Just what did you tell him?” she asked.

“Katie, it was a total accident, I swear. Here, sit down, and I’ll explain what was said in the conversation. Okay?” he asked as he pointed to a chair. Katie slowly sat down facing him. As he sat down, Melissa slid a cup of coffee in front of him. He took one look at the coffee and then looked up at Melissa. “Thank you, my dear, you’re a real lifesaver.”

Melissa just smiled and sat down next to Rick and waited.

“You’re aware that I knew Jack personally as fellow agents?” he asked Katie.

“I got that impression. Okay, so?” Katie asked.

“When your dad called today, the first thing that he told me was all about the dreams that he had the night before. I really had no idea as to what he was digging for. All he asked me was if I knew the exact date that Barnes had shot Jack. And since I already knew firsthand the exact date, I told him,” he explained.

“May 10, 1945, right?” Katie asked.

“As far as we can tell, yes. That’s the date that Barnes told us late last night. Just about the same time your dad was having the dreams that he told us about. Amazingly, he wasn’t being interviewed or anything. It was like something told him to tell us at that time and place. So then your dad asked me if he had admitted to anything else around that time period, anything tied to Jack.

“Well, like I said earlier, Jack and I were really good friends. So much in fact that I spent a lot of my free time over at his house.

“Anyways, when your dad had asked about any other thing that Barnes had confessed to, I mentioned that he had confessed to following Jack home one night. He also said that he then relayed the information to the Klan, who on the night of May 17 attacked and set fire to Jack’s home in Mobile, Alabama. And for the very first time, I realized that Jack never lived in Mobile, and I told your dad that. His reply was, ‘No, but we did.’

“And this sickening feeling came over me as I realized what had happened that night so long ago. Katie, please forgive me. I never meant to hurt your dad. It was truly the worst mistake of my life,” he told her.

Katie had pretty much the same look on her face as Grady had on his, but she was able to shake it off. She wanted to cry. She really did, but she couldn’t.

“Did he say why they torched the house? I mean, I know that they believed that it was Jack’s house, but why destroy it?” she asked.

“From what I can get from Barnes, Jack had told him that he had evidence against them. And that’s what they were out to destroy, not the house itself and surely not your mom,” he told her.

Katie just stared off into space, searching for something. “Well, I guess Daddy was right after all. There was a connection. Ya know what? I want to cry, but I have this sense of closure deep down inside of me. I know what happened the why of it and even the who, but I just can’t bring myself to cry. Imagine that, me, Ms. Crybaby herself, unable to shed a tear,” Katie told them.

“Well, maybe later after all of this sinks in. But I do have some other news that might just cheer you up,” he told her.

“Yeah, and what’s that?” she asked.

“Barnes and his buddies will be charged under federal law for the murder of your mother. And I promise you this on a stack of Bibles, he will not escape the death penalty for this one. I give you my word on it,” he told her.

“I appreciate that. I really do. But killing him won’t bring my mother back. And as far as I’m concerned, Barnes can burn in hell for all of

eternity, and I wouldn't shed a tear for him either," she told him.

"I can understand that," he said as he looked over at the doctor as she attended to Grady. Katie's eyes followed his stare. The doctor was talking to him.

"Doctor? Is he going to be okay?" she asked her.

"Come over here, and ask him yourself," she replied back.

Katie slowly made her way over to Grady's side.

"Just talk to him really slow and softly," the doctor told her.

Katie leaned over and looked him in the eyes. "Daddy, can you hear me? It's me Katie," she said in a very soft voice.

His eyes moved up to see her. "Katie darling," he slowly answered.

"It's okay. I'm right here. You had me worried," she told him.

"They killed her, Katie. Why?" he asked as he grabbed her and pulled her into him as he started crying with his head against her chest. Katie tried to comfort him, but she soon started crying too.

Paul King looked over at the doctor.

"Whatever you gave him, well, I would say that it's working," he told her.

"I guess so, but I haven't given him anything yet. That's Grady doing it all on his own. You're right. He is one tough cookie," she told him.

"So he's going to be okay then?" Melissa asked her.

"Oh, it may take a little time, but I think he'll come out of this a better man. At least he knows the truth about what happened. That's maybe the best medicine in the world," the doctor answered.

"No, I beg to differ with you. The love that those two have for each other, now that's some powerful medicine," Mr. King told her as he pointed toward Katie and Grady hugging each other.

"Okay, I stand corrected. That is some powerful medicine indeed."

Mr. King looked over at Melissa. “Any chance of getting another cup of this great tastin’ coffee?” he asked her.

“For you, the pot is always hot and full,” Melissa said as she reached over and picked up his cup. “Excuse me, miss, I didn’t catch your name,” she asked the doctor.

“I’m sorry, my name is Mary, Mary King,” she answered back.

“King? You two are married?” Melissa asked.

Paul and Mary just looked at each other and chuckled a bit.

“Heavens no! Paul is my brother,” Mary explained.

“Really? Wow, your parents must be awfully proud. I mean, their kids turned out so well, one being a Secret Service agent and the other one is a doctor,” Melissa told her.

“Well, thank you for the compliment. But we do have another brother. He’s a mechanical brain surgeon,” Mary told her.

“A mechanical brain surgeon? What in the tar nation is that?” Melissa asked.

Mary laughed a little bit. “He works on cars,” she answered.

“So he’s a mechanic?” Melissa asked.

“Yeah, but never call him that. He prefers the mechanical brain surgeon title. But he’s one hell of a mechanic,” Mary explained.

“Okay, I just never heard of a mechanic being called that before, is all. Anyways I was going to ask you if you wanted a cup of coffee,” Melissa told her.

“Yes, dear, that would be nice. Thank you,” she answered.

Melissa went off to the kitchen to get fresh two fresh cups of coffee.

Katie and Grady were both doing a lot better now. They were talking in their normal voices again. Grady glanced over and saw Mr. King and his lady friend sitting at the table.

“Paul, I’m sorry, but when did you get here? I just talked to you on the phone not five minutes ago,” Grady told him.

Paul and Mary slowly explained what had taken place. Grady was surprised to find out that it had actually been an hour and a half.

“Wow! Really that long, huh?” He looked over at his daughter. “I guess I must have scared the hell out of you. I’m so sorry, dear,” he told her as he hugged her again.

“It’s okay, Daddy. You’re back with us, and that’s all that matters now,” Katie told him.

Paul looked over at Grady. “So are you going to be okay with what you found out?” he asked. “I mean, at least you know the truth now.”

“It’s not that I know who did it. It comes down to who didn’t do it,” Grady answered him.

“What do you mean who didn’t?” Katie asked him.

“Well, I have a confession to make to you, Katie. Every day since that terrible night, I thought that I was somehow responsible for what happened,” he told her.

“You? Why did you think that you were responsible for the fire?” she asked.

“After the fire happened and we buried your mother, we tried to get past it and move on with our lives. But in the back of my head, I wondered if I had left something on or maybe the electrical wiring that I had done wasn’t done right, and it somehow caused it. I thought of anything that I could have done differently, but I couldn’t think of anything. But still, I felt somehow responsible for your mother’s death,” he told her.

“All of this time, you thought that you were responsible for the fire? Why didn’t you ever tell me that? God, it must have been pure hell, thinking that you were responsible for Mom’s death. How terrible?” she told him.

“And just how would I tell you that I thought that I was responsible for your mom’s death. I didn’t want you to hate me. So I kept it to myself. It

tore at me every minute of every day. And that, my charming daughter, is why I had to know. Just so I could go on living with myself. I had to know the truth. Even if it came down to the fact that I was responsible for what happened,” he explained to her.

“I could never hate you. Never. And you know that too. But to go through it alone, feeling the pain, the guilt all by yourself, that had to be hell. I just wish that you would have told me. I would have understood,” Katie told him.

“Well, some of your decisions that you’re forced to make in your life ain’t always easy, and they might not be right either. So you try to do what’s best for everyone concerned because life does go on. Doesn’t it?” he asked her.

“Yeah, I guess it does at that. I just thought that you and I had no secrets. That’s all. I understand why you couldn’t tell me, but I don’t have to agree with it. But from now on, no more secrets, okay?” she told him.

“No more secrets, deal,” he promised as he gave her a hug.

“Wow, that’s touching. But what you went through, if only in your mind, Grady, you’re one hell of a man. And I’m glad to have you as a friend and as a future father-in-law,” Michael told him.

“Thank you, Michael. It means a lot. And I’m glad to have you as a son-in-law as well,” Grady answered.

“All right that’s enough. You all are going to make me cry,” Melissa told them.

They all turned and looked at her to see her smiling back at them.

“Oh, Melissa dear, would you like a hug, dear? Come here, I’ll give ya a hug,” Grady told her.

She went over and got one of the best hugs that she could remember.

“Glad to have you back with us. You had us worried,” she told him.

“Glad to be back,” he replied.

“Well now that we’re all back in the real world, I do have some business to discuss with you all,” Mr. King told them as he pulled an envelope from his inside jacket pocket. Grady has informed me as to your monies that the four of you are to receive for finding the treasure and returning it to the proper people. Had you kept it, you wouldn’t be getting a check from the government, but the taxes on that amount of gold probably would have killed ya. So I have a check, and I can give it to whoever you decide to divide it up or do as your dad has informed me, and donate it to your favorite charity. So you decide.”

Melissa signaled all of them over to the far corner of the room where she proceeded to tell them of her idea. Every one of them thought that it was a very fitting and just tribute to all of those involved. She looked over at Grady. “Grady, don’t you want to hear this?” she asked.

“Nope, whatever you kids decide, I’m sure it will be just fine,” he answered.

Katie turned to Melissa. “Okay, but I think you should handle it. After all, it was your idea. Are we all in agreement here?” she asked.

They all agreed to let Melissa handle the entire donation process as they had heard it.

“Mr. King, do you think you can find us a picture of Jack?” she asked.

“Gee, I don’t know. But I’ll look. Can I ask why you want it?” he asked.

“Nope, sorry. It’s a surprise,” she responded.

“I see. Well, I’ll see what I can do then,” he answered back.

“Mr. King, I have a question for you,” Katie told him.

“Sure, Katie, what’s your question?” he asked.

“The other day, you told my dad that tomorrow at Jack’s service, we would be getting a surprise. In fact, you called it the surprise of a lifetime. Care to explain just what you’re talking about?” she asked him.

“Katie, I would love to tell ya. Really, but I can’t. I promised that I wouldn’t tell ya. So for that reason, I just can’t,” he told her.

“I see. So I guess we’ll just have to wait until tomorrow then, won’t we?” she replied.

“Yes, I guess you will at that. But I will tell you this. Bring some tissues because as I know you so well, you’re going to cry a river tomorrow,” he explained.

“Oh, you think you know us that well, do ya?” she asked.

“Yes, I do. I really do,” he answered.

# A Hero's Welcome

Six o'clock in the morning came early at Matterson House. There was a lot to do but not that much time to get it done. Jack's services were set to begin at noon with the repast to begin shortly after right there at Matterson House.

The caterers were to arrive by eight, and be all set up by ten with the food portion of their services to be brought out right after the services had concluded. The florist were to deliver the flowers no later than nine.

Mike, Rick, and Melissa set up the chairs and tables and were all finished by nine-thirty. Not too bad considering Melissa didn't do much more than supervise the two men as they did all of the work.

Jack's casket was to arrive no later than nine as well. Yes, everything was set. Hopefully! For it is a widely known fact that even a raging river needs but one dam to stop its flow. And they had a lot of possible dams, which could pop up at any time.

People started showing up at nine. Everything was happening at nine, far too much for Katie's way of thinking. But to her surprise, the Secret Service came in and made sure that everything went as scheduled. It was a very welcomed relief for Katie and Grady as well.

Grady and Katie were both dressed in their very best outfits. Nothing too flashy, just something plain and simple. Both of them sat down on the porch and took a break as everyone else were busy running around in circles. But it was the arrival of Paul King and his sister that brought them to their feet. As Paul and Mary slowly made their way up the gravel driveway, Grady noticed that there were two other people with them—another tall and slender lady and a small child. *A little girl*, Grady thought as he watched them from a distance. But as they got closer, Grady could not believe his eyes.

Grady walked to the edge of the porch and said, "Well, I'll be damned."

“What’s the matter, Daddy? Who is that is with Mr. King?” Katie asked.

Grady slowly stepped down off of the porch and stared in total disbelief.

“Elizabeth? Is that you?” he asked.

“Hi, Grady, how are you? I wasn’t sure that you would remember me,” the lady answered.

“My God, how could I ever forget you?” he said as he wrapped his arms around her. She returned the favor.

Katie didn’t recognize the lady, not at all. But she knew who she was. Elizabeth was Jack’s girlfriend. She remembered her dad talking about her several times. Katie walked up behind her dad. Elizabeth took one look at her and stepped back away from Grady.

“My God, just look at you, Katie, all grown up and all. You don’t remember me, do you?” she asked.

“I know who you are, but I’m sorry, I don’t remember you,” Katie answered.

“That’s all right. You were just a little girl the last time I saw you. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” she asked the two of them.

“Too long indeed. So what have you been doin’ all of this time?” Grady asked.

The little girl looked up at the lady, and she released her hand. The little girl ran off across the field to where some other kids were playing.

“Grady, I think we need to sit down. I have something to tell you,” she told them.

“Sure. What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing. We just need to talk, is all,” she explained as she followed Grady back up onto the porch and took a seat next to him. Paul and Mary joined them.

Elizabeth looked at Grady and Katie. There were tears in her eyes.

“Elizabeth, are you okay?” Grady asked.

“To tell you the truth, no, I’m not, but I’ll get to that in a minute. When Paul contacted me a few days ago and told me that you had found Jack and had discovered what had happened to him, I was relieved beyond words. I told him if it was the last thing that I do, I was going to be here today,” she told him.

“The last thing that you do? What are you getting at, Elizabeth?” Grady asked.

“Well, before I get into what’s happening in my life, I need to tell you what happened in Jack’s before he disappeared,” she told him.

“Well, the last thing I remember Jack telling me was that you and him were fighting again. But if I remember right, you two were always arguing over something, so I never paid much attention to it,” he said.

“Yeah, we certainly did that, I guess, but it’s what we were arguing over that’s important. Especially now,” she told him.

“Okay, you’ve lost me. What are you talking about?” he asked.

“Jack wanted to marry me. But I always told him no,” she explained.

“Yeah, I do remember that. But I guess you had your reasons,” he answered.

“I told him no because he wanted kids, and I was told that I couldn’t have any. Ever,” she explained.

“Yeah good old Jack was always big on having a family of his own,” he replied.

“Well, one day I woke up, and I didn’t feel right, so I went to a doctor and found out that I was indeed pregnant,” she told him.

“Really? Well, that’s great!” Grady answered.

“That following weekend, we were married. Jack tried to contact you, but he never did. The following week, he was sent down here,” she told him.

“Wait a second, you two got married, and you just found out that you were pregnant, and then Jack disappeared?” Katie broke in to their conversation.

“Exactly. Jack never saw his baby,” she replied.

“Oh my god! So what happened next? What did you do?” Grady asked her.

“Well you had your hands full with that fire and all, and by the way, I’m was so sorry when I heard about Katherine. She was a good woman and a very dear friend,” she told them.

“You knew about the fire?” Grady asked.

“Well, not the fire itself, but I found out about a week later when I went looking for you. I saw your house, so I checked with the local sheriff, and he told me what had happened. So I figured you already had your hands full with your own personal problems, so I chose to go about it myself,” she explained.

“What did you do by yourself?” Grady asked her.

“Well, I had my baby, our baby. I had Jack’s baby,” she explained.

Katie’s head turned to see the cute little blonde girl playing with the other kids. She turned back to Elizabeth. “So that little girl is Uncle Jack’s little girl? She’s my cousin?” Katie asked her.

“Yes, Katie, that is Jack’s little girl, but there’s something else you need to know,” she told her.

“And what’s that?” Katie asked.

“Her name. Jack said if he ever had a little girl, he wanted to name her after his favorite niece,” she explained.

Katie could fill the tears building up deep down inside of her.

“She’s named after me?” Katie asked her.

“That’s right. And I know that you didn’t get a very good look at her, but she could be your twin, I swear to God. You might not be exact twins, but there’s no mistaking that you’re both Windslows,” Elizabeth told her.

Katie just stared at the little girl running around with the other kids. “So what do I say to her. I mean, she doesn’t know me, does she? I mean, does she know who I am?” Katie asked.

“She knows only that she’s named after her cousin. But she doesn’t know you’re the one. Go ahead, go down there and talk to her. You’ll see she’s a sweetheart just like you,” she told her.

Katie slowly started walking toward the little girl. When she was far enough away, Elizabeth turned back toward Grady.

“I need your help, Grady,” she told him.

“Sure, Elizabeth, whatever you need. How bad is it?” he asked.

“You already know? But how?” she asked.

“I can see it in your eyes. How bad is it? What did the doctors tell you?” he asked her.

“It’s cancer. And there’s nothing that they can do,” she told him.

“Damn! I knew it. How much time did they give you?” he asked her.

“I wasn’t supposed to make it this far. But I had to if only to say good-bye to Jack,” she told him as she started crying. Grady got up and took her into his arms.

“Now, now, we’ll get through this thing together. You’re family, and families stick together. So where are you living?” he asked.

“We have a little house about four hours south of here. Why?” she asked.

“Because that’s nonsense. You’re moving in here. We have far enough room for the two of you. And I promise that we’ll make whatever time you have left here as painless as we can,” he told her. Grady looked over at Paul. “You’ll see that her stuff gets over here as soon as possible?” he asked him.

“Whatever it takes, I’ll get it done,” Paul replied.

“Thanks,” Grady responded.

“But your daughter can’t know. She needs to tend to herself and her wedding,” Elizabeth told Grady.

“My daughter is pretty smart. She’ll know before you can tell her. But I’ll agree not to tell her unless she asks me. Then I’ll have to tell her. Okay?” Grady told her.

“Fair enough. I really didn’t want to dump this on your lap, but I had nowhere else to turn,” she said.

“Elizabeth, I would be upset if you hadn’t. I just wish that you would have told us earlier,” he told her as he held her tight.

Elizabeth looked over at the girls. Big Katie was hitting it off with little Katie just like they’ve known each other for years.

“Grady, look at the girls. Do you think the world is ready for two Katie Windslows?” she asked.

Grady turned to see the two girls playing together. “No, I don’t think the world is ready for two Katie Windslows. Not now, not ever,” he replied to her.

“And, Grady, thank you so much for finding Jack and bringing him home,” she told him.

“Well, he was your husband. You should have spoken up. I never thought that he ever married, let alone had a child. But there were decisions that had to be made. You had every right to voice your views on them,” he said.

“I thought about it. But then I realized that you loved Jack just as much as I did, if not more. And I’m sure that whatever you decided to do here today, it would be a fitting and honorable tribute to him. So I let you do as you wanted,” she told him.

“Well, between me and Mr. King over here, I’m sure that you won’t be disappointed. Not at all,” he told her.

“I know that in my heart, your brother is looking down at us right now, and Katherine is at his side, and they’re both very proud of you and your daughter. I know that I would be,” she told him as she turned to face Mr.

King. "And you, sir, Jack could not have asked for a more loyal or devoted friend than you are, sir."

"I didn't do anything that Jack would have not done for me had this all been reversed somehow. Jack was a very good man, and it was my honor to know and work with him," Paul told her.

"Elizabeth, may I ask you if your daughter knows of your condition?" Mary asked her.

"Well, she knows that her mommy is sick, but, no, she doesn't know that I'm dying. I tried to find the strength to tell her several times, but I just couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth," she explained.

"Well, I think that we'll really need to tell her. She really should know the truth," Grady told her.

"Of course, it's just really hard to get the right words out," she answered.

"We'll find a way. But if you don't have that much time, I mean if the doctors are right that is, then sooner might prove to be better than later," Grady told her.

"Okay, but not today. This is Jack's day. I'll gladly take tomorrow. If that's okay with you all?" she asked.

"That will be fine," Grady told her as he glanced over to see his daughter and his newly found niece running toward them. He just stared at the little blonde girl as she ran toward him. And he had to admit it—she looked a lot like his daughter had at that age. It was like looking into the past. The little girl ran up to her mom. She was full of excitement, talking a thousand words a second.

"Mom, Mom, look who I found. Can you believe it? It's her. It's really her. She's my cousin. Can you believe it, Mom," the girl told her mom. Every face of every person on that porch was all smiles as they listened to that little girl rattle on to her mom.

"Yes, I know, Katie. She looks just like you. Doesn't she?" Elizabeth asked her daughter.

“We could almost be twins, Mom. And she’s going to teach me to ride a horse and how to dance and—” her mother cut her off.

“Katie, calm down a second. I know that you’re excited, and all but there’s someone else that I’d like you to meet,” she told her.

The little girl just stopped moving and talking all in a drop of a hat. It was as if someone had switched off the power to her.

“Someone else? Who, Mommy?” the little girl asked her.

“Katie, this gentleman over her is your father’s brother. He’s your Uncle Grady,” she told her as she pointed to Grady.

“I have an uncle too?” she asked.

Grady knelt down to the little girl’s level. “Hi, Katie, it’s an honor to meet you,” he told her.

“You’re . . . you’re my uncle, sir?” she asked.

“Yes, dear, I guess that I am. But we can do away with the sir part, okay? Just call me Grady or Uncle Grady, okay? Can you do that?” he asked her.

“Yes, sir—I mean, yes, Grady,” she said as she slowly walked over and reached for his hand. Grady raised his hand to meet hers as they shook hands.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Uncle Grady,” the little girl said with a smile.

“The pleasure is all mine, but you know what I would really like right now?” he asked her.

“Ice cream?” the little girl answered. Everyone chuckled a little.

“Well, maybe later, but what I’d like right now from you is a hug.” He no sooner had the words out of his mouth and the arms of that little girl were wrapped around his neck. Grady hugged her back.

There wasn’t a dry eye on that porch even Grady felt the tears rolling down his cheek. Just then, Mike and Melissa came up onto the porch. As Grady released the little girl from his hug, she turned to face them.

Both Melissa and Mike stopped dead in their tracks, their eyes jumping back and forth between the two Katies.

“Oh my! Twins?” Melissa proclaimed with a smile.

“Michael, Melissa, I’d like to introduce you to my Aunt Elizabeth and my cousin, Katie,” she told them.

“Wait a second, there’s two Katies?” Melissa asked.

“No, there’s two Katie Windslows. Two for the price of one,” Katie replied.

Michael introduced themselves to Elizabeth and the smaller version of Katie.

“It’s an honor to meet you, miss. Grady told us some stories about you,” Michael explained to her.

“Oh, he did, did he?” she asked. “I’m curious just which story did he tell ya.”

“The one where you and Katherine used to start the fights,” Mike told her.

“We never started any fights! Grady, have you been telling stories again?” she asked.

“I told them about your walk that you used to do. Remember? I just never thought that he would tell you that I told you that. Thanks, Michael, well talk about this later,” Grady answered as he threw Mike a dirty look.

“My walk? You remember that? God, I haven’t done that for years and nor have I ever thought about it. What in the world made you remember that?” she asked.

“Elizabeth, there isn’t a man alive that ever saw you’re walk and doesn’t remember it. You drove a lot of men crazy with it, remember?” he asked her.

“Yes, I do recall causing a fuss, but I was a lot younger then and a lot better looking, I might add, too,” she answered.

“You haven’t changed that much, Elizabeth, maybe there’s a little gray in your hair, but I bet you could still turn a few heads,” he told her.

“Oh, really? Please don’t stop. You’re being much too kind,” she answered as she started laughing.

“Uhh, Grady, we actually came over here to tell you that they’re ready to begin. They’re waiting on you all,” Michael told him.

“Then I guess we had better head that way then,” he said as he held out his arm for Elizabeth. “It would be my honor to walk you over there, Elizabeth,” he told her.

“I would not have expected anything less from you, Grady,” she said as she took his arm, and they slowly made their way across the field to where Jack was to be laid to rest.

Both Elizabeth and Grady were very much surprised to see Jack’s casket covered with the American flag. There was also a military color guard and a seven-person precision rifle team, all standing at attention in their polished brass and the stunning uniforms of the United States Marine Corps.

Elizabeth could not believe, not in her wildest dreams, that Jack would be honored in such a grand fashion as she saw before her. Yes, Grady and Paul had really outdone themselves. Again.

They slowly made their way to the front row of chairs and took their seats. Little Katie just sat there next to her bigger cousin. Her hands held Katie’s hand as tightly as she could. They just looked at each other and smiled.

Father Mathews walked up to the podium and stared out at the rather large group of people before him.

“Friends and families, I’d like to welcome you all on behalf of the Windslow family to the celebration of Jack’s life. Yes, I did say celebration. We’re here to celebrate the life of Jack Windslow or Rings as I’m told that many of you knew him by. Jack wouldn’t want you to mourn his passing into God’s kingdom, but he would want you all to remember him as he lived. But how would you best describe him? Was he a patriot? Yes, he was

that. Was he proud to be an American? Without a doubt. Jack gave his life for his country. Maybe he didn't die on some well-known battlefield in some godforsaken war that was fought so many miles away on some unknown piece of beach. No, sir, Jack died right here, fighting to protect what we so easily take for granted—our freedom. Many of you have asked me if Jack ever served in the Marine Corps because you saw all of these fine men here dressed in their dress uniforms. Well, the answer to that would be no. He never did. But when you have a man such as Jack whose only goal in his life was the protection of America, what better way do we have to honor him than with a full-blooded American military send-off.

“But there seems to be more to Jack than many of us ever knew before. For unknown to most of us, Jack leaves behind a loving wife, Elizabeth, and a very bright and beautiful little girl, his daughter, Katie. That's a side of Jack that many of you never knew about.

“They tell me that to know Jack was to love Jack. Maybe that is true, but now we must remember Jack as he would want you to remember him. Celebrate with us as we celebrate the life of a man that appears to have touched so many in life and in death. Would you please allow me to lead you in prayer?” he asked them as everyone closed their eyes and bowed their heads. “Father, our Lord in heaven, we gather here this fine day to remember our friend Jack Windslow. And give him a proper send-off into your kingdom of glory in the heavens above. We know that Jack has been at your side for some time, but as we lay him to rest, we pray that you have accepted Jack as one of your children. We pray that you guide him through all of eternity in your righteous world above.

“We pray to you, Father, to give his family and their friends the guidance that they'll need in the troubled times that lay ahead. Through your never-ending love, we pray. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, we pray to you. Amen.”

Everyone joined in for the final amen.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we ask all to please stand as the members of the United States Marines send Jack off with a twenty-one-gun salute followed by the removal and the folding of our country's flag.”

As the corporal of the guard barked out the orders, the seven-man rifle team fired their guns into the air. They did this three times. The percussion from the rounds sent waves of vibrations throughout the crowd. Katie held on to her cousin as the guns proudly sent out the message, loud and clear.

They watched as the military honor guard slowly removed the flag from Jack's casket. Each of their movements was done in precision. As they slowly folded the flag, there wasn't a dry eye anywhere. Especially in the first row.

The corporal of the guard slowly laid the flag down on to Elizabeth's lap. In one precise movement, he stepped back and threw her a perfect salute. The tears flowed from every eye.

People soon started filing past them as they gave out their condolences to Jack's family. When they were all finished, Grady slowly helped Elizabeth to her feet just as little Katie leaned over her father's casket and gave it a hug. "Good-bye, Daddy, I'll see you when I get to heaven," she said just as she slowly kissed the coffin that held her father's remains. She then laid a single red rose on top of the casket.

Elizabeth laid a rose as well, and as she put her hand on the casket, she told Jack that she loved him. "God bless you, Jack," she said out loud.

Katie and Grady each laid a single red rose on top of the casket. As they said their good-byes Grady asked Michael to escort Elizabeth to their assigned table. He would join them shortly. He needed to say good-bye to his brother in his own way, he told them. So they left Grady standing by himself at Jack's graveside.

Grady just looked at the shining casket that held his brother's remains. Funny, it was the same casket that Grady had lain in just a few days ago. Grady just giggled a bit.

"Well, Jack, I did it. I brought you home. You knew that I would, didn't you? But now we're faced with some more trauma. You know about Elizabeth already, don't you? I give you my word, Jack, as your brother, I'll do everything possible within my power to make her as happy as she can be for as long as she has left here on earth. And your daughter will be taken care of, but you already know that too, don't you? And she'll never forget

you, brother, I promise. I miss you so much, Jack. I wish that you were here to see this, Jack, in person just so I could tell you that I love you and hold you just one more time. I'll be joining you and Katherine sometime soon, but I'm not in a hurry so I hope you don't mind waiting just a bit longer, Jack. So until we meet again. Rest in peace, my brother, and remember that I love you," he said as he turned to walk away.

Grady might have felt a little sad, but inside, he was so proud of his brother.

Grady slowly made his way over to the table where everyone was already seated. He sat down between Elizabeth and her daughter. "So was it what you expected?" he asked Elizabeth.

"Grady, I never expected anything like that really. Thank you so much. You're brother would be proud," she told him.

# Reserved for Presidents and Soldiers

Little Katie just looked up at her uncle. “Uncle Grady, can I ask you a question?” she asked.

Grady turned his attention to the blue-eyed little girl sitting next to him. “Sure, sweetheart, what’s your question?” he asked her.

“Was my daddy a soldier like that one?” she asked as she pointed to one of the Marines walking by.

“Well, Katie dear, no he wasn’t. Why do you ask?” he said as he looked at her.

“Well if he wasn’t a soldier, and I don’t think he was ever a president, then why did he have a flag over his coffin?” she asked him. Grady could tell that the little girl was really sincere in her question.

“Well, honestly, Katie, I’m not sure why he had one,” he told her as he glanced over at Mr. King who was sitting across from them. “Would you care to answer her question?” he asked him.

“Certainly,” he answered as he dabbed a napkin across his lips. “You’re right. Normally, that honor is reserved for those people who put their lives in danger as part of their job. Just like the policemen, the firemen, and people like that. But your dad deserved the send-off that he received today. And would you like to know why?” he asked her.

“Yes, I would please. I’d like to know what made my dad so different,” she answered.

“Different? I don’t know if I would label your dad as being different, but he was special, very special. You see, Katie, there are people who love America, and there are those that really love America. Your dad really loved this great country of ours. And just like so many before him, and a lot more that will follow him, he was willing to put his very life on the line as he tried to defend it. Now, you can defend something, or you can pretend to defend something. And there’s a big difference between the two. If you’re defending something and you know that you’re about to die doing it, you

have but two options, don't you? I mean, you could run away and live to fight another day, or you can stand there and fight, and whatever happens, well, it happens. Your dad stayed fighting for what he believed in. America, the red, white, and the blue. Do you understand so far?" he asked her.

"Yeah, but what was he fighting against? I don't understand," she told him.

"Katie, you look like a very smart girl, and from what your mom has told me you're an A student, is that right?" he asked her.

"Yes, sir. My mom says that a good education is the key to my future," she answered.

"And your mother is right. Education is the key. But in your classes, have you talked about the Constitution of the United States?" he asked her.

"Yes, we have, just a few weeks ago in fact," she answered.

"That's great, but can you tell me what the first three words of the Constitution are?" he asked her.

"Sure, that's easy. The first three words are 'We the people,'" she answered.

"That's right. Very good. But does it say 'We the people but only the chosen ones or just the whites'?" he asked her.

"No, that would be stupid," she answered.

"Well, if it says 'We the people,' then maybe you can tell me why the blacks aren't included in the words 'We the people,'" he asked her.

Katie just looked at him with a very questionable look on her face.

"What?" she asked.

"Hold that thought for just one second. When you think of America, what one word comes to mind?" he asked her.

"I would have to say *freedom*. That's the first word that came to my mind," she answered

“Good choice, but if America stands for freedom, can you tell me why if you’re black, especially here in the south, your freedoms aren’t the same as a white man?” he asked her.

“I never really thought about before. But I guess that’s just the way that is,” she told him.

“Well, that answer is why we have a problem in this country. And don’t take it personally, but that way of thinking is wrong. And there’s a lot of people that think just the same way that you do. But they’re wrong. All of them,” he told her.

“Well, I can see that it’s wrong, but how can we change it?” she asked.

“Well, you as a person, you alone, might not be able to do a lot, not on your own. But when you add people like me and your Uncle Grady, now there’s three of us. There’s power in numbers,” he told her.

“But how does all of this stuff entitle my dad into getting a flag over his casket?” she asked him.

Paul looked around at the other people at the table. He was surprised to see that all of them were glued to their conversation. Even a few passersby had stopped to listen. He returned his attention back to Katie.

“Your dad stumbled on to something by accident. At first, he probably thought that it was nothing to get worked up over. But he kept an eye open to it all the same. Now back then, he had no way of knowing for sure what was to become of this little group of guys that he had found. But he reported his finding back to Washington just the same. He supplied names and dates and even a few pictures of these guys in action. The government saw the same thing your dad had seen. Trouble, with a capital T,” he told her.

“What did he find?” she asked.

“What your dad found was the very first signs of a radical group that had their eyes on destroying the black race here in America. The Ku Klux Klan or the KKK as they would soon be known,” he told her.

He could see that she was taken totally by surprise.

“My dad discovered the KKK? Wow!” she said.

“Well, here’s something that I’m not even sure your uncle knows about. One of these Klan people actually tried to recruit your dad into the Klan. And he pretended to be a part of them. But only for the purpose of gathering any information on these people. So if you were to go back and look at the membership roster for the Klan, if they were stupid enough to have one, you would most likely see your dad’s name,” he told her.

“My dad actually joined the Klan? Are you sure?” she asked him.

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure. But your dad was never a member of the Klan. He was a government agent just doing his job. And undercover work is very dangerous, even for guys that were as good as your father was. And when the Klan found out who he was, they killed him.

“Now, Katie, you have to understand one thing about your dad. He believed that all men, regardless of color, are entitled to the same rights as the man standing next to him. Even if one was black and the other one was white.

“But for far too long, the black race here in America has been degraded, demoralized, and looked at as anything but an equal to the white man. Why is it that a black person can’t drink from the same water fountain as a white man? Why does a black man have his own restaurant to eat in? Heck, they can’t even use the same toilet as a white man. Now does that make any sense? I don’t think so. And I’m warning you all, some day they’ll start standing up for equal rights just as the white man. It might be one of them who drinks from a white man’s fountain or maybe one of them will refuse to give up their seat on a bus to a white man. I don’t know, but it’s going to happen. Trust me,” he told them.

“And that’s why my dad got a flag on his coffin?” she asked.

“Katie, your dad got a flag draped over his casket because he earned it. He stood for America in ways that no white man ever had. Oh, many have followed your father’s footsteps since then, but you daddy made the trail for them to follow. Your dad was a friend of mine, and I can tell you this. When I think of America, I think of Jack,” he told her.

“Wow, I wish that I could have met him!” she said as she wiped a tear from her eye.

“I’ll tell ya a quick story about your dad. You see, your dad always whistled when he worked. The same old tune day after day. And one day, I asked him, ‘Jack what is that tune that you’re always whistling?’ And you know, he looked at me and just told me that it was a song that he had heard, and it just caught on. And you know, the next thing I knew, I was whistling it too. And I still didn’t know the name of it. It sounded familiar, but I just couldn’t put a name to it. And then one day, after your dad had disappeared. I was listening to the radio, and this lady singer Ella Fitzgerald came on singing this song, and the next thing, I knew I was whistling right along with her singing,” he told her.

“Well, what was the name of the song?” she asked him.

“Well, if I tell ya, you’ll be whistling it too,” he told

“I want to whistle to it,” she told him.

“How about I just tell you a few lines out of the song and see if you can pick it up from there. Okay?” he asked her.

“Okay,” she told him as everyone else tried to squeeze in to hear the lines of the song. He just looked at them and smiled.

Paul slowly recited the first few lines of the song that Jack had always been whistling,

O beautiful for spacious skies  
For amber waves of grain  
For purple mountains majesties  
Above the fruited planes.  
Then he stopped and waited.

“My dad used to whistle ‘America the Beautiful’?” she asked.

“He sure did. All the time. And that lady that sung it on the radio when I first heard it and made the connection, she’s black lady, and man, could she sing. Ain’t that right, Grady?” he asked him.

“Oh, yeah, Ella could carry a tune, that’s for certain,” Grady answered.

“Oh my god, you know, I can picture Jack working around the house, and I can hear him whistling. It was ‘America the Beautiful.’ I never thought about it before. How weird. I just thought that he was making it up. Thank you, Paul, that memory was long ago lost, but not now,” Elizabeth told him.

“You’re welcome. Anytime,” he told her as he returned his attention back to Katie. “A person isn’t always remembered just because of his name, Katie. They’re remembered for the real person that they are on the inside. Regardless of the color of their skin. So now do you know why your dad deserved the flag?” he asked her.

“Yes, sir, I do. Thank you,” she told him as she stood up and ran around the table and gave him the biggest hug that she could.

“So where does all of this racism end? I mean, it’s true about what you said. But just because it’s happening surely doesn’t make it right,” Melissa asked.

“Melissa, maybe it will end someday. Maybe not in my lifetime, maybe not even in little Katie’s lifetime. And even when it’s over, you’ll still have a few whites that are upset about it being over, and I’m sure there will be some blacks that keep bringing it up for no other reason other than they can. Slavery tore this country apart once, and racism can do it again. If we don’t stop it.” He turned back toward little Katie. “You know, Katie, you say that *freedom* is the word that comes to mind when you say America. I know that you’re only ten, but when you get older, you have to go out and see America.

“Right now as we speak, President Eisenhower is fighting to pass a bill that will build superhighways all across this great country. Imagine that, you could actually get on a highway here in Savannah and travel all the way across America all the way to California and the Pacific Ocean. How great would that be?” he asked her.

“Wow, all the way to California? Have you ever seen California, Mr. King?” she asked him.

“Many times. But what I’m trying to express to you is the freedom that we’re blessed with. You know that there are countries in this world that won’t let you travel state to state. But we can. There’s so much to see and do in this great beautiful big country of ours. Just promise me that you’ll try to see as much of it as you can. Okay?” he told her.

“I will, and someday, I’ll be standing in California and thinking of you, Mr. King,” she told him as she gave him another hug.

“Katie, I have a real important question for you,” Grady told her.

“Okay, Uncle Grady, go ahead and ask me. Ask me anything you like. I’m ready,” she told him.

“Well, first off, you have to come back over here and sit back down before your food gets cold. Okay?” he told her.

She ran back around the table and sat back down in her chair. “Like that?” she asked.

Grady chuckled a little bit. “Yeah, just like that. I was wondering how much you like it here,” he asked. “I mean your cousin Katie is here. I’m here. Mike and Melissa and her boyfriend are here.”

“Oh, I love it here. Katie is my newest bestest friend in the whole wide world,” she answered.

Big Katie just smiled at her, but she had no idea as to why her dad was asking her that. She didn’t have to wait that long to find out. Not long at all in fact.

“Really? That’s good. Because as of this moment, you and your mom are going to live with us. How would that be?” he asked her.

She just went silent. She turned to look at her mom. “Mom, is that true. We really get to live here? With Uncle Grady and Katie and the horses and —” she just stopped talking.

“What’s the matter, Katie?” her mom asked her.

“I’ll be able to visit Dad anytime I want to?” she added.

“Yes, Katie, anytime you want to,” Elizabeth told her as she fought back the tears, for she knew that Katie would soon be visiting her as well.

“Well, what do you think of that idea, Katie?” Grady asked her.

“That would be swell, Uncle Grady, but what about all of our stuff back home?” she asked.

“I’ll have it all moved up here for you, Katie,” Mr. King told her.

“But there is one thing you’ll have to do first, Katie,” Grady told her.

“And what’s that?” the little girl asked.

“You have to ask your cousin if it’s okay first,” he told her.

She got up from her chair again and walked right up to her cousin and just stared at her. “Well, what do you think? Would it be all right if Mom and I moved in with you guys?” she asked her with the most profound look on her face.

“Gee, I don’t know. What do you think, Daddy, do we have enough room for these two?” she asked him.

“Wow, never thought about having enough room. We might have to move some stuff around but—”

Little Katie cut him off, “Uncle Grady, Mom already told me that you have fourteen bedrooms. Nobody has that much stuff.” She turned her attention back to her cousin. “Well? Yes or no?” she asked again.

“Sure, we’d love to have you. But your uncle really does have that much stuff,” Katie warned her.

“You’re kidding?” the little girl looked really concerned. But her frown soon turned to a smile.

“Thank you, Katie,” the little girl said as she gave her cousin a hug. “Mom, they said it was okay. So are we?” she asked her mom.

“Sure, Katie, if that’s what you want,” she told her.

Big Katie saw the pain in Elizabeth's eyes, and she knew the answer as to why. But she didn't know the when part. And Katie suddenly looked at Elizabeth with a whole new perspective. She wondered if little Katie knew. *Probably not*, she thought to herself. She threw her daddy a look that told Grady that she knew the reason behind it.

*I told Elizabeth that you would catch on rather quickly*, Grady told himself.

Little Katie was jumping around giving everybody hugs and when she got around to her Mom, she just stopped and looked at her.

"Mom, are you okay?" the little girl asked her.

"Yeah, just a little tired, is all. It's been a long day. I'll be fine," she told her.

Little Katie looked up at her uncle.

"Mom has been sick a lot. I think she might be sick again," she told him.

Big Katie was right on it as she walked around the table and took her cousin by the hand.

"Come on, coz, you and I can go for a walk. Uncle Grady will help your mom. Okay?" she told the little girl.

When Katie had the little girl far enough away, Grady looked at her.

"Elizabeth, are you okay?" he asked her.

"Grady, I really need to lie down," she told him.

Grady and Paul helped her into the house and got her upstairs and put her out across Katie's bed since hers was bigger than his.

"There, is that better?" he asked her.

"Yeah, thank you. You're a good man, Grady Windslow. You too, Mr. King," she said before her eyes closed and fell asleep. The two men left her alone to rest as they went back outside. As they got outside, Paul lit a cigarette.

“She looks pretty bad, doesn’t she?” Grady asked him.

“Yeah, she does. But she’s a fighter, Grady. She learned that from you and your brother,” he told him.

“I reckon so. But that still doesn’t make the outlook look any better, does it? Damn, why her? Why now?” he asked.

“I don’t have the answers to that one, my friend. But I will tell you this. You’ve helped her more than you could ever know, Grady,” he told him.

“Yeah, and how’s that? She’s dying, and there’s not a damn thing I can do for her,” Grady told him.

“But you already have. Her main concern was her daughter. Where would she go, what would happen to her. You and your daughter have answered her worst fears. Can’t you see that?” he asked him.

“Yeah, I guess so, but still . . . it’s hard to watch knowing that there’s nothing you can do. It rips you up on the inside,” Grady told him.

“I know, but there is one more thing that you’ll be giving her when the time comes,” he told him.

Grady just turned and gave him a weird look. “And what might that be?” he asked.

“Grady, because of you, sir, she’ll be able to rest next to her husband again. And you did that. Nobody else. Just you. And if you ask me, that’s the best thing you could have ever done for her,” he told him.

A small smile started to grow across Grady’s face. “I did do that, didn’t I?” he asked.

“Yes, sir, you sure did,” Paul said as he walked down off of the porch. “And I see that you were right about your daughter catching on too. A very observant young lady you got there,” he added.

“She takes after her mom,” Grady said as he too stepped down off of the porch. “But it makes you wonder just how much little Katie knows, doesn’t it?” he added.

“Funny I was thinking the same thing. Bright little girl just like her cousin.” Paul said as he dropped his cigarette onto the ground and ground it into the dirt with the toe of his shoe.

“You know what, Paul? All of that stuff that you were telling Katie about how the blacks are looked at differently and treated differently, I’ve never understood any of that. I mean okay, yes, there was a time when the white men bought and sold them like property. But that was darn near a hundred years ago. I really think it’s time that we get past that part of American history and move forward,” Grady told him.

“Sounds easy, doesn’t it? But the truth of the matter is this. Your daughter was raised not to think that way, so she doesn’t. But when you have a racist parent, you’re going to have some racist kids. And trust me, when I tell you this. There’s a hell of a lot of racist parents still out there. So it’s going to be a long, hard battle as we try to break those chains.

“And even when this racist stuff is all over maybe years from now, you’ll still have some black folk who will be mad as hell that it ever happened in the first place, and just as many, if not more, white men who are equally upset that it’s over. It’s going to be a no-win scenario for everyone. And then you throw in the hate words. Words like *nigger* and *spook* and so many more, words that are designed to do only one thing, and that’s to cause hurt. And those words do that. And I know they’re only words, and in reality they don’t mean anything, but it’s the racist bastard that’s using them that you’ll need to be concerned with. It’s all nothing more than a great big ball of hate that’s starting to get unraveled. And if you ask me, it’s about damn time.” Paul told him.

“I agree with you. Racism is a nasty, dirty part of this world that we live in. And it’s about time that we start cleaning up after ourselves,” Grady told him.

“You sound a lot like your brother. I don’t know if I ever told you this before, but Jack used to talk about you all the time,” he told Grady.

“Really? Jack talked about me, you say? I can only imagine the things that he said about me,” Grady replied.

“Well, I can assure you that he never spoke bad of you. That’s for sure. And I do recall him talking about your daughter, Katie, too I might add,” he told him as he placed his hand onto Grady’s shoulder.

“What in the world did he say about her?” Grady asked.

“He used to tell us all about this beautiful blue-eyed niece of his and how much he envied you and your wife. I can distinctly recall him saying, ‘If I ever had a daughter, I’d want her to be just like Grady’s daughter.’ And when I saw your daughter for the first time, I knew not only why he had said that, but after seeing little Katie, I knew that he had gotten his wish as well,” Paul told him with a huge smile on his face.

“Really? Now if that doesn’t touch you down to the bone, I guess nothing ever will,” Grady replied with a smile of his own.

“So let me ask you this. Are you guys ready for this wedding to happen or not?” Paul asked him.

“Oh, yeah, we’re ready all right. About as ready as a coon is right before he gets shot maybe,” he said with a hint of laughter to his voice.

“That’s what I thought. If you would allow me the honor, my sister and I would like to offer you our help,” he told him.

“I’m not sure that we really need any help. But if you two want to, I reckon it can’t hurt. Why? What do you have in mind?” Grady asked.

“Oh, you’ll see. Just a little something to make it a day to remember, is all. Especially for the girls. I’ll tell ya, but it has to be our little secret. Okay?” Paul said with a sinister tone to his voice.

“Not quite sure I like the tone of that, but then again, this could prove to be rather fun. So tell me what you’re thinking,” Grady told him as the two of them started walking across the pasture, back to where their guests were.

# A Little Bit of Shakin' Going On

The two cousins walked out across the field. Neither of them said anything. They just walked in total silence. Then little Katie stopped and looked up at her cousin.

“Katie, my mom is really sick, isn’t she?” she asked.

Katie didn’t know what to tell her cousin. Katie herself didn’t know much more than that she was sick. But just how bad her sickness was she didn’t know for sure.

“What would make you say that?” she asked her little cousin.

“Mom thinks because I’m only ten years old, I wouldn’t or maybe couldn’t understand. But I lay in my bed sometimes late at night, and I can hear her crying. And I know that she’s talking to God,” little Katie told her.

“Well, just because she talks to God that’s nothing to be overly concerned about. After all, I talk to God all the time, and look at me. I’m not sick, am I?” she asked her.

“It’s not the same thing. I know something is wrong, really wrong. And I hope that you’re not going to talk to me like a kid just because I’m only ten,” she told her older cousin.

“I would never do that. But I really don’t know what I can tell you, dear. I simply don’t know enough about your mom’s condition. It’s not that I won’t. It’s more like I can’t just because I don’t know the facts yet,” she answered.

“Would you like to know what I think?” the little girl asked.

Katie was shocked to hear her little cousin talking like this. She surely didn’t sound like a little ten-year-old girl. But she was curious about her cousin’s thoughts on her mother. So Katie told her, “I’d love to hear what you think, Katie. Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“I think Mom is really sick. I know that she’s been to a lot of doctors because I went with her. And she’s always crying when we leave. But I

think that she's going to be with Dad soon. I know that she doesn't want to go, but I don't think she has a choice in the matter," Katie told her as she wiped a tear from her eye.

Katie just stared down at her little cousin. *How could this sweet, innocent little girl take the idea of her mom's sickness so candidly?* She kneeled down before her and looked her straight into her eyes. "Katie, you're a very brave little girl, but I don't think you should be thinking that way, not until you have the facts at least. I mean maybe you're right and maybe you're not, but thinking that way before you know for sure can't be a good thing," she told her.

"I don't want to think about it. But when I hear her crying, I can't help myself," she told her.

"I know. That would be really hard, I guess. But you really need to sit down with your mom and tell her exactly what you told me, the same way that you told me. Your mom deserves a chance to explain all of this to you before you start thinking the worse. Okay?" she told her.

"Okay, I will, but do you really think she'll tell me the truth?" she asked.

"Katie, your mom would never lie to you. And you know that too, don't you?" Katie asked her. But in the back of her mind, she wasn't being totally honest with her niece. Surely, her aunt would tell her cousin the truth, wouldn't she? Truthfully, she couldn't be sure that she would or wouldn't.

"Yeah, I think you're right. I apologize for thinking that way. It was wrong," she told her.

"Well, it's okay, I guess, but just this time. But your mom loves you, Katie, and she deserves a chance to tell you the truth herself. Did you know that I lost my mom when I was ten. Just like you are now?" Katie asked her.

"Really? Did you cry?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. I cried for days. I still do sometimes. I miss her so much, but I talk with her all the time. And I feel better," Katie told her.

"You talk to her? Just like we're talking now?" she asked.

“Well, sometimes. But most of the time, I talk, and she just listens. I know she’s there because I can feel her presence. And just like I talk to my mom, you can talk to your dad too,” Katie explained.

“Me? I can talk to my dad? Really?” the little girl asked with much enthusiasm.

“Sure. Tonight when you go to bed and when you’re all alone, just start talking to him just like you’re standing there in front of him. You’ll see, he’ll answer you,” Katie explained.

“But what if someone hears me talking to myself?” she asked her cousin.

Katie just looked at her in total surprise. “If you want to talk to him in secret, just talk to yourself. You know how you can hear your voice inside your own head? That way, it’s just you and him. Understand?” she asked her.

“I do. And I will tonight. Thank you, Katie. I love you so much. I’m glad to have you as my cousin,” the little girl told her as she wrapped her arms around her neck and gave her a big kiss on the cheek.

“Well, you’re welcome, dear. And you know that I love you too. Come on, let’s get back over there before all of the food is gone. Okay? I’m hungry. How about you?” she asked.

“I’m starvin’,” the little girl answered as they started walking back toward the house.

Grady and Paul met them halfway. Katie looked down at her niece. “Honey, you go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute after I talk to your uncle. Okay?” she told her.

“Okay, I’ll save you some chicken,” she answered as she walked away.

Katie waited a few minutes, or so it seemed, until she turned to look at her dad. “Aunt Elizabeth? How bad is it?” she asked.

Grady and Paul exchanged glances at each other. Grady looked right at her. “It’s about as bad as it can get. She has cancer. She’s dying, Katie, and there’s nothing that we can do to stop it,” he told her.

“My God! Katie was right,” she answered.

“Katie? She knows?” Paul asked her.

“Oh, yeah. That cute little thing knows all right. In fact, she told me that her mom would soon be with her dad. What a brave little girl!” Katie told them.

“Well, that makes our job of telling her a lot easier. Doesn’t make it any less painful, just easier, I reckon,” Grady responded.

“Do you know how long the doctors gave her? What, six months, a year, or what?” she asked them.

The two men just stared at her. Neither of them could muster the strength to tell her the truth. But Katie read between the lines. “Less than a month?” she asked again.

“Katie, your aunt wasn’t supposed to be here this long,” Grady told her.

Katie realized what her dad had said. And she suddenly felt light-headed. Grady and Paul steadied her as she regained herself.

“No, this isn’t fair. I just met her. Damn it, there has to be something that we can do. She can’t die. She just can’t,” Katie cried as she fell against her dad’s shoulder.

“Honey, believe me, if there was anything that we could be doing, it would be done. But it’s out of our hands, sweetheart. It’s all up to God now,” he told her.

“Where is she? I need to talk to her right now!” she asked him.

“She’s on your bed. But she’s resting right now,” Grady told her.

“Then I’ll wait for her to wake up. I want her to see my face as soon as she opens her eyes,” she told him as she ran toward the house.

“Oh, boy, this is getting uglier by the minute,” Grady told Paul as they both watched her running toward the house.

Katie slowly opened the door to her room. There she was stretched out across the bed, just as her dad had told her. Katie slowly made her way

toward the bed and softly sat down next to her. She carefully brushed her hair from her face. Elizabeth opened her eyes.

“Aunt Elizabeth, it’s me Katie,” she told her.

“Hi, honey. I take it your dad told you about me?” she asked.

“Just now. You can’t die. We need time to—” Katie stopped.

“It’s beyond my control, sweetheart,” Elizabeth told her.

“It just isn’t fair. We haven’t even had a chance at getting to know each other . . . or anything,” Katie told her.

“Well, I’m not dead yet, dear. Here, help me up. I need to go back outside. I can’t let Katie know. Not yet,” Elizabeth told her.

Katie helped her to sit up with her feet on the floor. “Katie already knows. She told me that you were sick, and that you would soon be joining Uncle Jack,” Katie told her.

Elizabeth just looked up at her. “She already knows? Very observant little girl, isn’t she? She takes after you, you know, in a lot more ways than just your name,” she said.

“Yeah, I know. It’s like I’m looking into my past whenever I look at her,” Katie told her.

“Katie, I do have a favor to ask you. Before I get to the point that I can no longer talk,” she said.

“Sure, whatever it is, just go ahead and ask me,” she told her.

“It’s Katie. You’re the only family that she has left. I can’t ask your dad. Hell, he’s older than dirt itself. So I need to ask you to do one thing for me,” she said.

“Katie? What about her?” Katie asked.

“Sweetheart, after I’m gone, I need to know that she’ll be all right. I need to know that she’ll be raised just like you,” she told her.

“Aunt Elizabeth, are you asking me to raise Katie after you’re gone?” Katie asked her.

“Sweetheart, I know it’s a lot to ask you, but I know that you’ll be sure that she gets a proper education and will be taught the same morals as your dad’s taught you,” she replied.

“Aunt Elizabeth, it would be an honor to take care of your daughter. You can rest assured that she will be raised into a very successful and educated young lady just as if you were there doing it yourself,” Katie told her with a smile.

“I have all the faith in the world in you, and Jack had it too. He really loved you, ya know?” she asked.

“I know that, and I loved him too. And I love you too,” Katie told her.

“I know that, sweetheart, and I love you too. I just wish that we could have had more time to get to know each other. But I guess we’ll deal with whatever time we still have left. But now, let’s go outside. There’s still some food left, isn’t there?” she asked.

“Sure, I mean if you’re up to it? Your daughter is holding me a spot,” Katie told her.

Elizabeth just looked at Katie. “My daughter is so lucky to have you as a cousin. Just as I am, to be your aunt,” she said.

“Well, if you ask me, truthfully, I think we’re all blessed to have each other. For ever as long as it may be,” Katie told her.

“Very well put, my dear. You’re Grady’s daughter all right. There’s no mistakin’ that,” Elizabeth told her.

“Well, just as long as I don’t get his whiskers!” Katie told her with a smile.

“Oh, that would be nasty, wouldn’t it?” she answered.

“Well, it’s a thought that I’d rather not think about. But about that food, let’s go get some. I’m starved,” Katie answered with a smile.

“Me too, let’s go,” her aunt told her.

Travel for the two ladies was slow at best, especially the stairs. But they made it down, and Elizabeth still had plenty of energy left.

Now to look at Elizabeth, you probably wouldn't know that she was as close to death's door as she was. In fact, to the innocent observer, she was still a very beautiful woman. And like Elizabeth had put it, "The outside was fine, but it was what's on the inside that was the problem."

And even in her black outfit, Katie still could see what her uncle must have seen so many years ago. Aunt Elizabeth was still a looker. And both Grady and Paul could see it too as the two women approached them.

Grady looked over at Paul. "Damn, that lady just keeps going, doesn't she?" he asked him.

"I would have thought that she would be down for the rest of the day or maybe a few hours at best," Paul confessed.

"Yeah, me too, but there she is again. She's got the willpower of an ox," Grady told him.

"Yeah, a very good-looking ox at that," Paul added.

The two couples approached each other.

"Elizabeth, shouldn't you be lying down and getting some rest?" Grady asked her.

"Grady, I might be sick, and I might be dead by this time next week. But if you think for one second that I'm going to lie on a bed and wait for my time to come, then I guess you don't know me as well as you thought you did," she told him.

"Wow, I guess not. But you're still as feisty as ever. I'll give you that," he told her.

"Well, thank you very much," she answered.

"So are we all going to stand here talking, or are we going to go get something to eat? We're hungry," Katie asked them.

"Oh, by all means, please go eat. I hate to picture you when you haven't been fed," Grady told her.

Katie and Elizabeth started walking toward the tables with Grady and Paul following a short distance behind them. As the women approached the

tables, Elizabeth noticed that there were two caterers headed toward them, one from the right and the other from the left. Both of the caterers had their arms full. One of them was carrying some plates while the other had a box of something in his arms.

Elizabeth glanced over at Katie. "Let me see if I can remember how to do this," she told her.

"Do what?" Katie asked.

"Remember the walk that your dad was talking about?" she asked her.

"Yeah, what you're going to do it now?" she asked.

"No, I said that I was going to try to do it. But it's been a long time since the last time my hips did moves like that. They might not work like they used to," she answered.

Elizabeth concentrated and then focused her hips to do their duty. Grady and Paul weren't expecting it, not at all, but when her hips did their sexy little jerk, they would have been blind if they didn't see it.

And the caterers were right where they needed to be too. And as Elizabeth did her sexy little jerk, one of the caterers tripped and dropped the armful of plates. The sound of crashing, breaking plates filled the air. The other caterer was so busy watching Elizabeth shaking her ass that he didn't see the first guy fall and walked right into him as he bent over to pick up the plates. Both men went crashing to the ground.

Elizabeth never even turned around to see the two men fall. She just kept on walking. A huge smile soon came across her face. "Yep, I've still got it all right," she said as she glanced over at Katie.

Katie was in total shock. Just a few sexy shakes of her hips, and two men had totally lost it. She was impressed. "Oh my god! You've got to show me how to do that," Katie told her.

"Ain't nothing to show you. Just remember when you're walking and your hip naturally kicks to the left, just kick it to the right instead. Go ahead, try it," she told her.

It took Katie but a few tries before she nailed it. And from the looks that several of the men were giving her, she had achieved the goal that she was hoping for. As she approached the table where little Katie was busy eating a chicken leg, Michael walked up behind her.

“What was that?” he asked her.

“What was what?” she asked as if she didn’t know what he was talking about.

“That little hip shake that you were doing. And don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about ’cause I know that you do,” he told her.

“Oh that?” she answered, pretending to be somewhat surprised. “Aunt Elizabeth taught it to me. Did you like it?” she asked.

“Well, I can tell ya that every guy here did, that’s for sure,” he answered.

“Why, Michael, are you jealous?” she asked with a smile.

“No, I’m not jealous—well, maybe a little. But I don’t want my girl walking around shaking her butt like that. That’s all,” he answered.

Katie liked the fact that he was jealous. She liked it a lot. “So what you’re saying is you did like it. Didn’t ya? But you don’t want me doing it for anyone but you. Is that what you’re saying?” she asked him.

Michael had to stop and think about it for a while. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m saying,” he finally confessed to her.

“Okay, I like it when my man gets jealous,” she told him.

Grady and Paul walked up to the table. They were laughing their asses off. Michael just looked at the two men. “Did you see what your daughter learned to do? Did ya?” Michael asked Grady.

“I did,” Grady answered. “But did you see all of the guys tripping all over the place. Elizabeth, you’ve still got it, that’s for sure,”

“Grady, that was your daughter doing it too,” Mike insisted.

“You’re right, Michael, of course. Katie, you should be ashamed of yourself,” he answered.

“But, Daddy, I just did what Aunt Elizabeth told me to do,” Katie responded.

“Maybe so. But we can’t have you going around here doing that. The next thing we know, you’ll have little Katie doing it too,” Grady answered with a smile.

“So tell me, Grady. Was it as good as it used to be?” Elizabeth asked him.

“Better. It was totally unexpected for sure,” he answered.

“I know that you darn near had me tripping over my own two feet too,” Paul told her.

About that time, Rick and Melissa walked up to the group. “What’s going on? I heard the sound of something breaking, and I looked over to see my brother here talking to ya. So what happened?” she asked.

“Nothing, but it would seem that Elizabeth here just showed Katie how to do her famous walk. And you can see the results,” Grady told her as he pointed to the group of guys that were trying to pick up the broken plates.

“Oh, really? You’ve got to show it to me too,” Melissa told Elizabeth.

“Sorry, dear, but that’s the last time my hips will ever do that,” she answered her.

“But that’s not fair,” Melissa told her.

“Relax, Mel. I can show ya,” Katie told her.

Melissa just looked at her and smiled.

“Oh, no, you’re not. Seeing my girl doing that was bad enough, but to see my own sister shakin’ her butt like that, the answer is no. As in no way,” Mike said.

“Hang on there, Mike. I wouldn’t mind seeing your sister shake her butt like that. Really,” Rick told him.

Grady just looked at Elizabeth. “Now see what you’ve started?” he told her.

“Hey, if a woman has it, might as well use it? Or shake it, as in this case,” she told them as she sat down next to her daughter.

“Hi, Mom. Are you feelin’ better now?” little Katie asked her.

“Yes, dear, much better. Honey, when you’re finished eating, I think we all need to have a talk. Okay?” she asked her.

“Is it about you being sick?” her daughter asked.

Elizabeth found the question hard to answer. But she did. “Yes, dear, it is?” she finally told her.

“Okay, because I have something to tell you too,” the little girl answered

“I’m sure that you do. But for right now, hand me a piece of that chicken,” she told her daughter. Katie handed her a drumstick.

“So when do you guys plan on filling me in on this famous treasure hunt that you all went on?” she asked them.

“Well, we can tell ya now if you prefer or maybe later,” Grady told her.

“Well, considering I might not have a later, I think you had better tell me now,” she replied.

So for the next few hours between all of them, Elizabeth was told the whole story about their adventure. They omitted the part about Suzie and the cave because little Katie was listenin’. But Elizabeth got the idea as to what was supposed to have happened in that cave.

“Wow, it all sounds very interesting. I sure wish that I could have been in on it with all of you,” she told them.

“Well, without knowing it, I really believe that you and Jack were right there with us. Even if it was just in spirit. You know what I mean?” Grady told her.

“Well, that’s very kind of you, Grady. But maybe Jack, but I really didn’t know that much about it,” Elizabeth told him.

Little Katie looked over at her cousin. “Katie, is that really a true story? I mean with the cave and the wagons and finding a buried treasure. That

really happened, I mean?” she asked.

Katie smiled at her little cousin. “Yes sweetheart, every word of it happened just like we said it did. And that’s how we found out what happened to your dad. Mr. King supplied us with the finishing details, but other than that, it all happened right here,” Katie told her.

“How exciting! A buried treasure and finding my dad too! We should have come here earlier,” she told them.

“But neither of us knew where the other ones were before Mr. King came into the picture,” Katie said to her cousin.

“Okay then, Mr. King should have come here earlier,” she replied.

Everyone laughed.

“I would have been here, sweetheart, if only I had known. But there was no way for me to know before I did. Sorry, Katie,” Mr. King told the little girl.

“It’s all right, Mr. King. We’re here now, and I guess that’s all that matters,” little Katie told him.

“You know what? Whenever I talk to you, I find it harder and harder to remember that you’re only ten years old,” he pointed out.

“That’s all right. Sometimes I find it hard to remember that I’m only ten too,” she replied.

“Katie sweetheart, like I told you before, we all need to have a talk. Do you think you’re ready to know the truth about what’s going to happen to us?” Elizabeth asked her daughter.

“Uh, excuse me, I don’t mean to interrupt you, but I think if you hear what Katie told me earlier, all of this will go a lot easier,” Katie told her aunt.

Elizabeth just looked at her. “Okay, if you think it will be easier, then I’m all for it. So please go ahead,” Elizabeth told her.

Katie turned to her little cousin. “All right, Katie, just tell your mom what you told me earlier. Okay? Can you do that?” she asked her.

“I think so,” she told her.

“Okay, just go nice and slow, just like you told me earlier. Whenever you’re ready, you can start,” Katie told the brave little girl.

Little Katie turned to look at her mom. “I know that you’re sick, Mom. Really sick. I hear you crying late at night,” she told her.

Elizabeth put her hand over her mouth. “You’ve heard me crying? I’m so sorry, Katie. I thought that I was being quiet. Why didn’t you tell me, sweetheart?” she asked her daughter.

“Because I know that sometimes kids hear things that they’re not supposed to hear. And I didn’t want you to be mad at me,” she answered.

“Oh, Katie, I could never be mad at you. And you know that, don’t you?” she asked.

“I guess I figured if you wanted me to know, then you would have told me,” she told her.

“I wanted to tell you, but this is really hard for me to talk about. Especially to you. Little kids shouldn’t have to worry about grown-up stuff. Maybe I was wrong,” she told her.

“Mom, I went with you to all of those doctors. And even while I waited for you while you talked to the doctor, I knew something was wrong,” she replied.

“Just how bad do you think it is, dear?” she asked her.

“Bad enough that I think you’re going to go where Daddy is,” she answered her.

“Oh my god, all this time you knew that I was really sick? And you kept it all to yourself? My God, I should have known that you would sense something was wrong,” she told her daughter.

“It’s all right, Mom. But you are going to go see Daddy, aren’t you?” she asked.

Elizabeth took her daughter in her arms. She was trying not to cry, but it was a losing battle. Katie cried too.

“It’s all right, Mom, I already know the answer. I may be only ten, but I’m pretty smart,” she told her mom.

Elizabeth pulled away from her daughter’s hug and looked at her straight in the face. “You’re not only the smartest girl I know, but you’re also the bravest little lady that I know,” her mother told her as she tried to wipe away the tears from her daughter’s face.

“I guess I had a pretty good teacher. Didn’t I?” she asked.

“I’m thinking that I might have been the one that had a good teacher. And you’re still teaching me things. God, I love you so much, and I’m sorry you had to go through this with me,” she replied as she tried to fight off another onslaught of tears.

“Mom, you’re treating me like a kid again. Just where else do you think I should have been? I belong with you. That’s what daughters do,” she told her.

“And where did you hear that, I wonder?” she asked.

“Katie told me that,” she answered.

“You love your uncle and cousin, don’t you?” her mother asked.

“Oh, yes. I love them a lot,” she replied.

“Well, you know that after I’m gone, you’ll be living with them, right? And you’ll still have to go to school and get good grades and all. Right?” she asked.

“Something tells me that Uncle Grady and Katie won’t let me do bad in school—ever,” she told her mom.

“Elizabeth, can I say something here, if you don’t mind?” Grady asked.

“Sure, Grady, go ahead,” she replied.

“Katie dear, while you might know that your mom is really sick and sooner or later she is going to be with your dad, I would prefer that you do not go into her room to wake her up. You let Katie or I do it. Okay?” he asked her.

“I don’t understand, Uncle,” she told him.

“Well, if your mom was to leave us in her sleep, which could indeed happen, I’d prefer that you not be the one to find her that way. It could do a great deal of harm to you at your young age. I know that you act and talk like someone a lot older than ten years old, but you’re still a ten-year-old girl. And ten-year-old girls don’t need to go through that. Okay?” he told her.

“Okay, Uncle Grady, I understand now. I wouldn’t want to find her like that anyways,” she responded.

“That’s good. Any more questions?” he asked her.

“Do you know when?” she asked her.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but I don’t have any idea as to when. Okay?” she asked.

“Will you be buried next to Daddy?” she asked.

“Yes, sweetheart. Anything else?” she asked.

“So I can talk to you when I talk to Daddy then?” she asked her.

“Excuse me? You talk to your father?” she asked her.

“Well, not yet. But Katie told me that she talks to her mom all the time. And she told me how to talk to Daddy. So I guess it will work so I can talk to you too,” she replied.

“Oh, I see. Then the answer would be yes, of course, I’ll talk to you. Anytime you want me to,” she replied as she glanced over at her niece.

“Well, I know that God will have you doing some stuff too, so if you can’t talk all the time, I’ll understand. Okay, Mom?” the little girl told her mom as she held her hand.

Elizabeth just stared at the bright-eyed girl before her. And any questions about her ability to raise Katie as a single mom without the assistance of a father figure in her life were answered right then and there. She reached out and took Katie into her arms and hugged her. The love that she held for Katie was unmistakable. No parent could ever be any prouder of their child than Elizabeth was of Katie at that point in time. And while

their time together may have been limited to whatever time Elizabeth had left, their love for each other had no limits.

Grady looked around, and to his surprise, he noticed that most of the guests had already left. And the table that they were seated at was the only one left.

“Uh, I hate to break this up, but let’s move this into the house, so the caterers can finish cleaning up,” he told them.

Katie looked around and saw that everyone had pretty much left already. “Gee, how long have we been talking? I didn’t even know that everyone was leaving,” she asked.

“Well, time flies when you’re with friends and family that you care for,” Elizabeth answered.

“Katie, can we have a word with you for a second?” Rick asked her.

Katie walked away from the main group and stood there before Melissa, Mike, and Rick.

“What’s up, guys?” she asked.

“It’s your aunt. We didn’t know that she was sick. Is there anything that we can do to help?” Rick asked her. And while he might have been the one to ask, she knew that he spoke for all of them.

“Thanks, guys, really. But there’s not much that any of us can do other than making her as comfortable as possible,” she told them.

“Can we ask what’s wrong with her?” Melissa asked.

“Cancer. My aunt has cancer. I was going to tell ya all later, but I actually only found out only a few hours ago myself. But you do have to admire those two. I mean, they’re taking this very well considerin’,” she told them.

“Taking it well, Katie, that’s an understatement if I ever heard one,” Melissa told her.

“Maybe, but, Michael, you and I do need to talk. My aunt has asked me to raise Katie after she’s gone. I wanted to ask you first, but I really couldn’t

tell her no, now could I?” she asked.

“Of course not. Katie will be fine. You did the right thing, just as you are now by telling me. Your cousin is always welcome into our home and our lives. But I think you already knew that, didn’t ya?” he asked her.

“Yeah, but we agreed not to make any decisions without talking it over beforehand. Remember?” she asked.

“I do, but this is a little different. This is family that we’re talking about. Besides, where else would she go? I mean really,” he asked her.

“Never thought about it before maybe because I wasn’t given a list of options. I mean she asked me, and I said yes. Not many choices in that scenario, is there?” she answered.

“Of course not, but I think it will be good for you and her to be together,” he told her.

“I feel sorry for you, brother dear,” Melissa told her brother.

“Why would you feel sorry for me, sis?” he responded.

“Simply because you get to live with two Katies, and you thought that one was fun. Buddy, now you have two of them. Lord have mercy on you,” she told him as she started laughing.

“Oh God, I never thought of that,” he answered as he stared off into space.

# Four Days and a Wake-Up

Five days away. The wedding was just five days away, and nothing was ready. Nothing! They had no dresses, no cake, and no minister. It seemed as if Father Mathews was going to be laid up in the hospital and more than likely would be unable to perform their ceremony.

But they had finished their vows. If nothing else, they had that.

“So what do we do now, guys?” Katie asked them. “I mean it’s just five days away.”

Melissa, Mike, and Rick sat around the table. Paul’s sister, Mary, was there to lend her ideas.

“Katie, you’re getting all worked up over nothing really,” Melissa told her. “You’ll have to trust me about the dresses. They’ll be here, I promise.”

“Okay, so we have two dresses and our vows. But we still don’t have a minister. And the last time I checked, we have to have one. So any suggestions from any of you?” she asked.

“Can I make a suggestion?” asked Melissa.

“Sure, you know a minister?” Katie asked her.

“No, but you don’t have to have a minister per se. I mean, can’t a judge do the ceremony?” she asked.

“A judge? What judge are you referring to?” Katie asked.

“Your judge, remember? He liked you, and I’m sure that he’ll do it.” Melissa answered.

“Yeah, maybe. You and I can go talk to him. Good idea. But I have another bombshell to drop on all of ya. Susie told me last night that she can’t be our maid of honor because she can’t face my cousin. Especially since her dad killed hers. And I have to agree with her. That would be tough. So I can’t say that I blame her. So we don’t have a bridesmaid either,” Katie told them.

“Excuse me, but we do have a maid of honor,” Melissa added.

“And who would that be?” Katie asked her.

Melissa just looked at Mary and threw her a smile. Mary returned the smile as if she not only knew what Melissa was thinking, but more or less expecting it as well.

“Well, what do you say, Mary? Would you like to be our maid of honor?” Melissa asked her.

“I wasn’t looking to be in the wedding party per se, but if you really need me to, I guess I can do it,” Mary answered.

“God, Mary, you’re a lifesaver! Thank you!” Katie told her.

“Well, I’m not going to stand back and just watch your wedding fall apart. But I can tell you this. Paul and I have a huge surprise for all of you, but it’s directed more for the ladies. And don’t ask me for details, but you’ll be pleasantly surprised, I promise,” she told them as she turned to see Grady and her brother, Paul, walk into the room.

“So what are ya all talking about?” Grady asked them.

“Just trying to get this wedding deal all set up. But it’s not looking very good,” Katie told him.

“Excuse me, but I told you that I would handle everything, and I have. Just relax,” he said.

“Excuse me, you have all of this all handled? Are you serious?” she asked him.

“Trust me. Paul and I have everything all done,” he reconfirmed what he had said before.

“You have a cake?” she asked.

“Done. In fact, we have two cakes. Four tiers high, all in white, complete with those cute little bride and groom figures on the top,” he told her.

“You’re kidding? How did you manage that?” she asked her dad.

“We just went in there, and I flashed my badge and told them it was an urgent order, and presto, we have the cakes,” Paul told her.

“You got two cakes just by flashing your badge?” she asked him.

“Yeah, I thought it might have been too much to flash my gun. Luckily, the badge was enough. Anything else you need?” he asked.

“What about the flowers, the chairs and tables, and the food and the drinks, and the music and everything else?” she asked.

Paul looked over at Grady. Grady said, “Go ahead tell her.”

Paul turned and looked at Melissa and Katie. “Done, done, done, and will be done if it isn’t already,” he said as he watched the expressions on the girls’ faces.

“You’re kidding! You guys did all of that? You guys are just too much,” Melissa told them.

“So everything is all done? I can’t believe you guys did all of that?” Katie answered.

“Hey it’s not every day that my daughter gets married. So I figured that whatever it took or whatever needed to be done, might as well do it up right,” Grady told them.

“But you guys do have one hurdle that you’ll have to overcome all on your own because Grady and I have decided to stay out of this,” Paul told them.

“Really? And what hurdle is that?” Michael asked.

“Well, it would seem that your aunt wants to be a part of your wedding. So you’ll need to find a spot for her that requires very little energy and no walking,” Paul told them.

“Yeah, she told us to tell you that she has to do this. We tried to talk her out of it, but you know how stubborn your Aunt Elizabeth can be. So I would suggest that you find a spot for her,” Grady added.

“That’s easy,” Mary told them. “I mean, if you each were to have your own maid of honor. I’ll be Melissa’s, and your aunt can be yours, Katie.

After all, a maid of honor doesn't do that much."

"What an excellent idea! What do you think, Melissa? Would that be too much for her?" Katie asked.

"Actually, I think it's a grand idea. And it's our wedding, so we can decide the actual duties of the maid of honor. So she wouldn't have to do anything, but she would be right up front in the spotlight so to speak, you know, her moment to shine," Melissa answered.

"Great! But will we be able to get matching dresses for both maids of honor in time?" Katie asked them.

"You ladies just leave that up to me, okay? You decide the color, and I'll do the rest," Mary told them.

Katie just looked at Mary, and a smile soon started to form across her face. "Okay, Mary, I'll let you handle it. Something just tells me that everything will come out perfectly just like we all planned it," Katie told her.

"Great!" Mary said with a smile.

"All right then, so we have two ring bearers, two flower girls, and two maids of honor. Sounds like we've got it all covered then," Melissa said with a smile.

"May I ask a question if ya all don't mind?" Paul asked.

"Sure, Mr. King, go ahead," Melissa answered. "What's your question?"

"Okay, I know where the grooms are supposed to be, and in a normal wedding, the bride would walk down the aisle with her father to meet the groom. But it seems to me that in this wedding, you would want the brides to enter in a much grander entrance, am I right?" he asked them.

"Just what are you suggesting, Mr. King?" Katie asked him.

"Well, if you recall that I told ya all that my sister and I had a big surprise for ya, well, I think this might prove to be the best time to let the cat out of the bag, so to speak," he told them.

“Okay. So what do you have planned for us? I mean we’re not going to jump out of a plane or anything like that, are we?” Melissa asked.

Paul just laughed. “No, you’re not jumping out a plane even though that would be a grand entrance indeed. Can I see that paper and pencil, and I’ll show ya,” he asked.

Rick slid the paper and pencil over to Mr. King. Everyone was leaning over to not only hear, but they also wanted to see what he was talking about. He drew a rough drawing of Matterson House and laid out where the wedding ceremony would take place.

“Okay, this is what you have planned now, right?” he said as he drew two lines that showed where the two brides would simply walk out of the house and straight down the aisle.

“Is that pretty much what ya all have planned?” he asked them.

“Yeah, I would say that’s pretty close. But what are you suggesting?” Katie asked.

“Well, nothing personal, but that’s rather boring in my opinion. What I suggest is this?” he said as he drew two lines, one on the right and the other on the left. But these two lines started at the far side of the house itself, totally out of sight from any of the guests and the expecting grooms. From there, the lines came around the front of the house and ran all the way around the back of the ceremony where they would pass each other, and then the lines came down on the opposite sides of the ceremony, ending right where they would have been if they had just walked out of the house. “So what do you think?” Paul asked them.

“Wait a minute. You want Melissa and me to walk all that way in our wedding dresses. I don’t think so. I mean, the dresses would be all dirty, and we’d be all sweaty,” Katie told him.

“Yeah, and if we had to walk that far, we’d be tired. And we do have the honeymoon to think of. I mean our menfolk might not appreciate us if we couldn’t stay awake. If you know what I mean,” Melissa answered.

Grady and Paul just laughed.

“Very funny, dear. But I promise you that your dresses wouldn’t be all dirty, and you’ll still have enough energy for your honeymoon,” Paul told them.

“And how do you figure that? I mean that seems like a long way to walk, especially in a dress,” Katie told him.

“Excuse me, but whoever said anything about walking?” Paul asked them.

“Well, if we’re not walking, how are we supposed to do this?” Katie asked.

“Why don’t you ride in?” he asked.

“Ride in. Like on a horse? Are you out of your mind? No disrespect intended, sir,” Melissa answered.

“Why don’t you all just walk outside and see what I’m talking about before you start jumping to conclusions,” he told them as he stepped out of the way.

All of them ran to the front door and stood there on the front porch. But there was nothing there. Nothing.

“I don’t see anything,” Mike said out loud.

“We can see that. I mean we can see that,” Melissa told her brother.

Mr. King walked out onto the porch followed by Grady and Paul’s sister, Mary. “Well what do you think? Pretty sharp don’t you think?” he asked them.

They all turned and looked at him.

“But there’s nothing here,” Katie told him.

“Oh, I’m sorry, can any of you whistle?” he asked.

“I can,” Rick answered.

“Well, Rick, what are you waiting for? Whistle if you can,” Paul told him.

So Rick whistled as loud as he could. Then from both sides of the house, they could hear something happening. Katie and Melissa just looked at each other. Neither of them had any idea as to what was about to happen.

Then from each side of the house, there appeared two white horses followed by two more, then two more and then two more, then came the coaches all done in white with polished brass trim.

Katie's and Melissa's mouths just dropped open. There before them were two white coaches that were simply beyond belief. Like something out of a fairy tale. Each of them were being pulled by eight giant white stallions.

Sitting up in the front seat was little Katie in one of the coaches while Aunt Elizabeth rode in the other. As the coaches pulled to a stop, little Katie jumped down from the first coach and ran up to her cousin.

"What do you think? Aren't they simply beautiful?" she asked her cousin.

But Katie and Melissa were speechless as they slowly walked down the steps and approached the huge white horses that pulled the coaches. Their men followed them. None of them said a word.

Paul looked over at Grady. "I told you that they would like them," he said.

"Sir, I think you just became a part of this family," Grady told him.

"That's a good thing, right?" he asked with a smile as he stepped down from the porch and walked up behind the two silent women.

"Well, do you like them? I mean they should make your wedding special, shouldn't they?" he asked.

The two women turned in unison, and tears were flowing down their faces. Without warning, Paul King was being hugged to death by both women.

Grady looked over at Mary. "I think your brother just became Uncle Paul. You don't mind that, do you, Aunt Mary?" he asked her.

She just looked at him and smiled. There were tears in her eyes as well.

“Well, are any of you going to say something, or do you all plan on standing there and never say as much as a thank you?” Elizabeth asked them.

“I don’t know what to say. This is a shock to say the least. They’re simply beautiful,” Mike answered.

The two girls released Paul from their death hugs and took a few steps back. Their eyes went from him to the horses back to him.

“Where did you ever find these? I can’t believe this! You just made our wedding the Wedding of All Weddings,” Katie told him as she tried to wipe away the tears.

“I agree. I don’t know what to say, really. I never expected this, not in my wildest dreams,” Melissa told him.

“Well, it wasn’t all me. I mean, it was Mary’s idea. I asked her what would make it the ultimate wedding, and this is what she came up with. So you should be thanking her, not me,” he told them.

Little Katie tugged on Katie’s arm. Katie reached down and scooped up her cousin into her arms.

“Did you see me?” she asked her cousin.

“I did. You looked like a little princess arriving at her palace,” Katie told her.

“Hey, and what do I look like?” Aunt Elizabeth asked her from her perch up in her coach.

“You? You look like a queen,” Melissa told her.

“Well, what are you all waiting for? Climb up there and take a ride,” Mary told them.

So Mike and the two Katies climbed up into one coach while Melissa and Rick climbed up and took their seats next to Elizabeth.

The driver of Katie’s coach turned and looked at Katie. “Where to, miss?” he asked.

“Doesn’t matter. Anywhere you like, my dear sir,” she told him.

The driver snapped the reins, and the coach started moving. The other coach followed.

Every girl dreams of being a princess, and right there in those coaches, Katie and Melissa were indeed living that dream.

Michael leaned toward the driver. "Excuse me, sir, but do you think we can go twice around the park?" he asked him.

"As you wish, sir," the driver answered as he steered the giant team of horses out of the gate and headed toward the park.

The looks that they got from the people in town was as if their loyal subjects waving to their queen. And Katie and Melissa played the part well as they waved back to their loyal subjects.

The people of the town were in a state of utter shock as they watched the giant horses prancing in unison, their hoofs clacking down against the hardened dirt in perfect rhythm, announcing their arrival to the world long before they got there. Several kids that were playing in the park dropped what they were doing and ran to greet the arriving coaches.

Katie and Melissa were on the top of their world. Paul and Mary had outdone themselves, and neither girl would ever let them forget it. Ever!

As the two carriages pulled through the gate, the smiles of Katie and Melissa could be seen all the way back up to the house. Little Katie, right along with the rest of the passengers, was just as happy, but it was the two future brides that really mattered the most. And those two were indeed happy, to say the least.

Paul met one of the carriages as Grady met the other. As they helped the passengers down, each of them received hugs and kisses from the women and handshakes from the two menfolk.

As the two groups joined together to make one, Mary asked them, "Well, what did you think of my idea?" A few seconds later, she was swarmed by two very grateful and ecstatic women. "Well I guess this means you like it, I take it?" she asked them.

“Like it? I love it! It’s utterly fantastic! I never thought about anything like this. I don’t know how to thank you,” Katie told her.

Melissa had too many tears rolling down her face to answer. But Mary got the answer she was looking for when she looked into her eyes.

“Well, when Paul told me about your wedding, I knew that we had to do something special. After all, Jack was my friend too. So since Jack was almost like family to me, I figured why the hell not. You only get married once, right, so ya might as well do it right the first time,” she told them.

“Yeah, but because of you and your bother’s generosity, everyone is going to remember what happens here on Saturday. I mean they’ll never forget it, ever. And we owe it all to the two of you,” Katie told her.

“Yeah and when some gal decides to get married in the future, they’ll have our wedding to look back on. Because on Saturday, we’ll be setting a whole new standard for the ultimate dream wedding,” Melissa added.

“Hey, you know what will add that finishing touch to your wedding?” Elizabeth asked them. “I mean, it won’t outshine a carriage that’s being drawn by eight giant white stallions, not by a long shot, but it would add just a dash of class to it?”

“What’s that?” Mary asked.

“Get the girls one of those fancy fringed umbrellas that they used to use. That would just add icing to the cake,” she told them.

“Yeah, just an added dash of class. I like it. What about you, Mel, do you like her idea?” Katie asked.

“I think it’s a swell idea. Just a little touch of the south. That’s all we need,” Melissa answered with smile.

“Well, with two of the most beautiful brides of the south and these fine carriages, coupled to those fine horses, what else do you need? I mean, really, Grady already told me that the four of you have been working late into the night to get your vows done. And I’m sure that with that much dedication, they have to be the vows of all vows,” Mary told them.

“Would you like to hear them?” Melissa asked her.

“I’d love to. But don’t you want to save them for the ceremony itself?” she asked her.

“Well, it’s not like you’re going to print them in the local paper if we read them to ya, are ya? And besides, we need an outside opinion,” Katie asked her.

“Okay, but I promise not to print them, not until after the ceremony anyways. Okay?” she told them as she started laughing.

“Ha ha, very funny. Come on inside, and tell us what you think,” Katie said as she led the group through the screen door. Paul stopped and looked at Grady.

“You coming in?” he asked him.

“Naw, you go ahead though, I’ve heard them about a million times. They’re quite good in fact, but I’ll just hang out here,” he told him.

“Okay, I’ll be right back. I’ve got to hear these,” Paul said as he walked into the house.

Grady was busy admiring the craftsmanship that went into the building of these fine carriages. According to Paul, they had been built back in the early to mid-1800s and more than likely up in New England somewhere.

They had been commissioned for some royal family’s visit, but he didn’t know who they were or even if they had ever showed up. Anyway, they were now the property of some private collector that Paul knew personally.

Grady was admiring how the builder had brought every piece of wood up to the next for an exact fit. There was no skimping here. No, sir, these were built with love and affection for the builder’s craft. Every bolt, every screw was done in polished brass. These carriages were well over one hundred years old, and there wasn’t as much as a scratch in either of these carriages. From the step plates up to the handles, everything shined as if they were made just yesterday. And the upholstery, how perfect was that. Done in a dark blood-red maroon color, it was very well done indeed. He reached up and felt the material. It was tough yet soft to the touch. As he climbed up into the coach, he realized that the design had allowed for ease

of access. In or out, it would be effortless. Even for a woman, he supposed. As he sat down and leaned back, his entire body sank into the padding of the seats. Oh, this was nice, really nice. And as he looked down, he noticed that a foldaway footrest was attached to the back of the front seat. A simple touch of the foot against the rest, and it unfolded. A very simple polished pole was all it was. But it was the quality of its craftsmanship that caught Grady's admiration the most.

Both carriages were done all in white with hand-painted maroon pin-stripping accenting the carriage's design. Yes, the person or people that had built these fine carriages loved the work, and it showed in every nook and corner of each coach.

As Grady climbed down, he couldn't help but admire the riggings of the horses. Normally, they would have been done in black. Only because it was easier to maintain and clean. But not these, no, sir. They were done in the same color as the upholstery had been done in. And you could see the quality of the leather that they had used. Anyone looking at these fine pieces of workmanship just had to appreciate the amount of time and devotion that went into the construction of these fine carriages.

He wondered if his daughter, or anyone else for that matter, had taken the time to really look at them the same way he had. He doubted it very seriously. But then again, they had been all caught up in the moment, so he would excuse them for being blind to the craftsmanship that went into these carriages so long ago. But at least he had taken the time to notice and admire them, and to Grady, that was all that really mattered.

Little Katie walked up behind Grady. "Uncle Grady, what are you looking at?" she asked.

Grady jumped a little bit when she spoke. He turned to face the bright-eyed little girl standing before him. "Just admiring the craftsmanship of these coaches," he told her.

"I'm sorry for scaring you," she told him.

"Aw, it's okay. Just got lost in the moment, is all. Didn't hear ya walk up behind me. So what are you doing?" he asked her.

“Waiting for my cousin. I talked to my daddy last night, and I want to tell her what he said,” she answered.

“Really? Can you tell me what he said?” Grady asked.

“Sure, I guess. He told me that he’s happy. He said that his funeral was the best tribute that he could have asked for. He also said that he was watching over me. He made me cry. I never talked to him before,” she told him as she wiped her eyes.

“Well, I’d tell ya one thing. Your daddy loved you, sweetheart. Even if he never met you, he still loved you. That’s just how your dad was,” he told her.

“I know, and I love him too. But I don’t want my mom to go there. I want her here, Uncle Grady,” she told him.

“I know, sweetheart. I really do. But sometimes, we’re not given a choice in these matters. So we have to put our faith in God. And as much as it might hurt, your mom will be a lot better off. Trust me,” he told her.

“How can she be better off if she’s not here with me?” she asked.

“Well, what I meant was since your mom is so sick, she’s in a lot of pain. She tries to hide it, especially from you. But I can see it in her eyes. So when she gets to heaven, her pain will be gone. You might still feel the pain of your loss, but hers will be gone forever. Do you understand?” he asked her.

“I think so. So in order for Mom’s pain to go away, we have to have pain? Is that right?” she asked him.

“Well, I never really thought of it that way, but, yes, that’s right,” he told her.

“Gee, this dying and heaven stuff is hard to understand, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Yeah, even for adults,” he told her.

“Uncle Grady, am I going to die too?” she asked him.

*Oh, this was going to be a hard question to answer,* Grady thought to himself. “Yes, dear. Unfortunately, everyone dies. Everyone. But it’s not a matter as to when you die, what’s important is how you live your life.”

“Why is that so important?” she asked him.

“Because how you live your life, regardless of how long or short it is, will determine what people think of you and how they remember you. If you think back to your dad’s funeral, you’ll remember how many people were friends of your dad and how many of them miss him. That’s because of the way your dad lived,” he explained to her.

“Oh, I see it now. So if you’re mean to everyone, then nobody will remember you. Is that it?” she asked.

“No, it isn’t. Because if you’re mean to everyone, then after you’re gone, that’s all that they’ll remember about you. How mean he was? I remember him being mean to everyone all the time. Now is that how you would want to be remembered?” he asked her.

“Oh, no, Uncle Grady. I want to be remembered just like my dad was,” she answered.

“Then I suggest that you try to live like your dad did. Treat everyone as you would want them to treat you, regardless if they do or don’t. And never ask anyone to do anything that you yourself wouldn’t do. Live like that, and you’ll be pretty safe,” he told her.

“Gee, Uncle Grady, you make it sound as easy,” she replied.

“Oh, it is. But you’ll have to deal with the temptations that will lurk around every corner. Pay them no mind, and stick to the values that your mom has taught you, and you’ll be all right,” he told her.

“Speaking of my mom, can I ask you for your help? I mean, if you’re not too busy after the wedding, that is,” she asked him.

“Honey, I’m never too busy when it comes to you, so what do you need?” he asked her. He wasn’t sure what she wanted, but he never, not once, thought that she would ask this.

“Before my mom dies, can her and I have just one day to ourselves? Just me and her. Maybe we can go to a movie show or something like that. I don’t mean to push you guys aside, but I’d just like to have one final special day where it’s just me and her. Could we do that?” she asked her uncle.

Grady just stared down at that blonde, blue-eyed beauty that was staring up at him. What he really wanted to do was to cry.

“Katie, yes, my dear, there are certain things that a little girl has to have permission to do. Like riding the horses or going to the park, things like that. But certainly, asking for some time alone with your mom isn’t one of those. What in the world made you think that you had to ask for time alone with your mom?” he asked her.

“Well, I don’t want you to be mad or anything,” she answered.

“I won’t be mad. I promise. Go ahead and tell me, what made you think that you had to ask for time alone with your mom?” he told her.

“Well, when Mom is sitting on her bed, I try to talk with her, and then you guys walk in. When Mom is sitting on the front porch, I try to talk to her but you guys show up. I mean, I understand why and everything. But every time I try to be alone with her, someone shows up, and then Mom starts talking to them. It’s like I’m not even there anymore,” she told him.

“Oh my god! I never realized that we were doing that. I’m so sorry, sweetheart. We never meant to intrude into your time alone with your mom. I tell ya what, if you can get your mom to go to the movie house with you, I’ll pay for it. Heck, I might even toss in a trip to the soda fountain or the ice cream parlor. All on me, okay? It will be my way of saying I’m sorry. And next time you’re alone with your mom, I promise you that nobody will interrupt you. Okay?” Grady asked her.

“Thanks, Uncle Grady, you’re the greatest uncle ever. I just knew that you would understand,” she told him as she gave him a great big hug.

He returned the hug. “You’re welcome, sweetheart, but never be afraid of voicing your opinion, dear. Right or wrong, you have every right to have them heard by everyone. Just think what would have happened if you hadn’t told me and your mom went to be with your dad. You would have

been upset because you never got to have your free time with her. And that, my dear, would be simply terrible and totally unacceptable. And inexcusable too, I might add,” he told her.

“So what you’re saying is if I don’t like something or I think it’s wrong, I should bring it to your attention? Is that what you’re telling me, Uncle Grady?” she asked him.

“That’s right,” he told her.

“Regardless of what it is?” she asked.

“Okay, wait a second now. I see a question forming here. What don’t you like?” he asked her.

“Vegetables?” she said with a very questionable look on her face.

“Okay vegetables are not included in this. You have to eat your veggies. They’re good for you,” he told her.

“I didn’t think it would work, but I tried anyways, didn’t I?” she asked him.

“That you did, sweetheart, that you did. And by the way, your schoolwork and your chores, they’re not a part of this either. Okay?” he told her.

She just looked at him. “Gee, a girl just can’t get a break around here, can she?” she told him as she turned to walk away.

Grady just laughed. “Guess not,” he said to himself.

He watched as Katie went over and started petting the horses. Grady turned and walked into the house where they were just finishing the reading of their vows. Grady waited for them to finish.

“I need to talk to all of you right now,” he told them.

“Sure, Daddy, what’s up?” Katie asked him.

“We have a major problem here, and we need to deal with it right here and now,” he told them in a very firm and harsh tone.

“Grady, this isn’t like you. What’s wrong?” Elizabeth asked him.

“Would you like to know what your daughter just asked me?” he asked her.

“Katie? Why? What did she say that’s got you so upset?” she asked.

“She asked me if you and her could have a day to yourselves. Just you and her. Because every time she tries to talk to you alone, one of us comes in and interrupts the conversation,” he told her.

“My God! Have we been doing that?” Katie asked.

“I’m not sure if we have or haven’t, but Katie thinks we have. And if she thinks that, then apparently we are. She has to have some alone time to spend with you, Elizabeth. She has to,” he told her.

“I wasn’t aware that we were even doing that. How terrible she must feel right now. What did you tell her?” Elizabeth asked him.

“I apologized for doing it, and I promised that it will never happen again. So if you need to see Elizabeth and Katie is here, you’ll just have to wait for Katie to leave. Understood?” he asked all of them.

All of them said that they understood.

“Elizabeth, pretty soon Katie will be coming in here to ask you to go to the movies with her. I hope you’ll be able to find the strength to go with her. It’s my treat. And I hope you like ice cream as well,” he told her.

“I do like ice cream, and I’ll go with her even if you have to carry me,” she told him.

“Nope, sorry. This is just for you and her. Nobody else,” he told her.

“Well, I meant that as a figure of speech, Grady,” she told him.

“I know that, but a deal is a deal. And by the way, on Fridays for now on, no veggies are to be served with dinner,” he added as he turned and walked away.

“No veggies on Fridays. Where in the world did that come from? Daddy loves his veggies,” Katie asked in very questionable tone.

“I bet you it’s Katie. She hates vegetables,” Elizabeth responded.

“Fine then, no veggies on Fridays. Glad that’s settled,” Katie told them as she started laughing.

“I sure wish your dad was around when we were kids. We hated eating vegetables,” Melissa told them.

“Don’t all kids?” Rick asked.

“None more than Katie, I’ll bet ya,” responded Elizabeth.

# The Dresses

Melissa showed up early the next morning so she and Katie could go talk to the judge. They hoped that they could persuade him to perform their ceremonies. But she got there a wee bit earlier than Katie had expected her to. So she sat there drinking coffee with Grady as Katie got dressed.

“Grady, can I ask you something?” she asked him.

He lay down the morning paper and looked at her. “Gee, this must be important if you thought that you had to ask first,” he told her.

“Well, it’s about your house. It’s been bugging me ever since I first came here,” she told him.

“You don’t like this old house?” he asked her.

“No, I love this house really,” she proclaimed.

“Well then, what’s your question?” Grady asked her.

“Well, it your screen door,” she answered.

“What’s wrong with my screen door?” he asked her.

“Nothing really, but you have those beautiful double wooden doors with that real fancy glasswork,” she answered.

“And?” he asked as he waited for her to finish whatever it was that she was saying.

“Well, you can’t see those beautiful doors through the ugly screen door. There, I said it,” she told him.

Grady just gave her a blank stare. “You know what? I never thought about it before, but now that you mention it, I can see your point,” he responded.

“Well, I wanted to say something before, but well, I just couldn’t. I hope that you’re not upset with me. I just can’t understand why you would

want to hide those beautiful doors behind that ugly screen door,” she explained.

“Upset at you? Me? Never in a day. But I’ll look into that screen door. I promise,” he told her with a smile.

“Okay, but I do have something else to tell ya since I kind of have your attention,” she said.

“Well, by all means, go ahead. Is there something else you don’t like, or is this something more important?” he asked her.

“No, not really important, but I need to tell you this all the same,” she told him.

“Well, you have my full attention, dear, so go ahead,” he said.

“You know when a girl dreams of her wedding, they have these wild dreams about what they think they want. And I was no different. But because of you and Paul, my or I mean, our wedding is going to surpass any dream that I might have had. And I just wanted to say thank you from the bottom of my heart, really. A few weeks ago, I didn’t even know you. And ever since I met you, you’ve treated me like a part of your family. I just wanted to let you know that your kindness has not gone unnoticed,” she told him.

“Well, that’s a very honest statement, being that you are a part of this family. You and Katie have become the very best of friends just like sisters. And I’m happy for the both of you. And I’m thrilled to be a part of your wedding. I mean that.

“You know what? You came here one night not knowing me from Adam. And yet you sat down here and listened to this wild tale that I laid out before you, and you listened with an open head. You were able to toss aside everything that you thought that you knew before because I asked you too. You trusted me enough to hear the whole story before you made any rash comments. That says a lot about the person that you are, dear. What man in his right mind would not want you in their family? That and you’re a good-looking lady too, I might add. Rick is a very lucky man,” he told her.

“My mother keeps telling me and Mike that we’re both rushing into this way too fast. And sometimes, I think she’s right. But there are other times that I just know that she’s wrong. So are we? I mean how do you know if it’s right?” she asked him.

“Well, maybe you are at that. But just like you said, maybe you’re not. I don’t claim to have all of the answers about everything. But you’re the one that should know. You’ll feel it in your heart. People in love just know if it’s right. But I’m sorry to tell you this, but if you have any doubts about marrying Rick, then I have to tell you not to,” he told her.

“Oh, I have no doubts about marrying Rick, none at all. But it’s just happening a little too fast at times, that’s all,” she replied.

“You’ve got stage fright or wedding jitters,” he told her.

“What is that?” she asked him.

“It’s your body reacting to the shock of marriage and everything that goes with it. And it’s normal. Believe me, everybody gets them. But I do believe that women get them worse than men do. It’s like driving a car for the first time. Remember how nervous you were the first time? But now you get behind the wheel just like you were born there, right? It’s the same thing. Trust me, you’ll be fine,” he told her.

“God, I hope not!” she told him.

He just looked at her. “What do you mean when you say that you hope not?”

“Well, the very first time that I drove my daddy’s car, I drove it through two fences. It wasn’t real pretty,” she told him.

“Well, if you think that everything is going to fall into place just because you got married, you’re in for a big surprise. It takes work, a lot of work from the both of you to get your marriage to work. And at times, you may want to pull your hair out, but you’ll stick to your guns, and everything will work its way out. You’ll see,” he explained to her.

“I guess we will at that,” she said as she turned to look out the front window as she heard a car pull up out front. She didn’t have to wait to see

who it was. She recognized the car. She knew who it was.

“Who is it?” Grady asked her.

Melissa turned to look at him. She was all smiles.

“That, Grady, is Violet, our dress lady. The dresses are here,” she told him as she went to the front door to meet her. She met her at the door of her car.

“Well, hello there. My, this a very big house,” Vi said as she stared up at the front of the house.

“Wait until you see the inside. So . . . did ya . . . bring them?” Melissa asked her.

“Well, no, there’s a little problem that we need to discuss,” she answered.

Melissa’s smile disappeared in a flat second. She knew that the wedding was only three days away. And she would have to find a way to tell Katie that she had let her down.

“Relax, I’m just kidding with ya. They’re in the trunk. Had you going, didn’t I?” she asked her.

Melissa took a second to realize what Vi had just told her, and she started smiling again. “You’ll never know just how close I was to a major heart attack,” she told her with a huge smile.

“Yes, I did. I could see it in your eyes. That’s why I didn’t string it along as long as I had planned. Here, give me a hand with these,” she said as she walked over and popped the trunk open. The two boxes were huge and must have weighed at least thirty pounds each. Melissa took one of the boxes while Vi managed to get the second one.

Vi only got to the bottom of the steps before Grady came outside. “Here, let me get this,” Grady said as he took the large box from her.

“Well, thank you, sir. You must be Grady. Melissa told me all about you, sir,” Vi told him.

“Well, if she told you anything bad, then I’m not him,” he answered with a smile.

“Actually she only told me good things,” Vi responded.

“Well then, in that case, I’m Grady. Glad to meet ya,” he responded. They both started laughing.

As they entered the house, they slid the boxes onto the dining room table. Vi was looking at the interior of the house. She couldn’t believe the work that Grady had done so far.

“This old house is like a palace. You do all of this?” she asked him.

“For the most part, yes, but there’s still a long way to go before everything is done,” he answered back with a certain sense of pride to his voice.

“Well, you should be very proud of your work, sir. Very nice, and by the way, I just love that big old sign out in your yard. That I wasn’t expecting,” she told him.

“Yes, Katie, did tell me that your parents had a run-in with her great-grandfather. Very nice story as I recall,” he answered.

“Vi, would you like a cup of coffee?” Melissa asked her.

“Yes, I would. That would be nice,” she answered.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I must have left my manners in my other clothes,” Grady said as he reached over and slid out a chair for her.

“Oh, that’s all right. We all get sidetracked once in a while,” she told him she sat herself down in the chair.

Katie came bouncing down the stairs. She was just in a good mood. She was totally unaware that they had company. She saw Melissa first.

“Hey good morning to ya,” she told her as she stepped down off of that last step of the stairs.

“Good morning. Boy, what’s gotten into you this early in the morning?” she asked her.

“Nothing really. It’s just getting one day closer to Saturday. And by the way, after we see the judge, why don’t we swing by your friend’s house and see how the dresses are coming along?” she told her just as she entered the dining room to see Vi sitting at the table. And the two large boxes were right next to her. “Oh, you’re here!” she said as she spotted the lady sitting at the table.

“Good morning, Katie. Your dresses are pretty much done. Maybe a few slight alterations but nothing serious, I hope,” she told her.

“Really? Can we see them?” she asked.

“In a moment. I need to talk to you and Melissa first. Get yourself a cup of coffee, and we’ll talk,” she told them.

The two girls went into the kitchen and soon returned with a cup of coffee in each of their hands. They both took seats at the table and waited to hear what she had to say.

She just looked at the two overeager ladies that were staring at her. She turned to face Grady. “Don’t they look like a couple of wild animals waiting to pounce on their next meal?” she told him.

“That’s exactly what I thought,” he answered.

“Well, we’re just a little excited, is all,” Katie told them.

“Okay, I get the message. Now when I measured the two of you, I found that the two of you were almost the same size, remember?” she asked them.

“Yeah, I do recall that. So?” Melissa asked.

“Well, the problem is that you’re about an inch taller than Katie is,” she told her.

“And the problem is?” Katie asked her.

“Well, I was thinking that the two of you would look so much better if you were both the same height,” she told them.

“So how do we fix that? I certainly can’t grow an inch in three days, and there’s no way of making Melissa shorter. So what do we do?” Katie

told her.

“Exactly, so I came up with a cure-all remedy. I bought you girls matching shoes. They’re both white in color but Katie’s has two-inch heels while Melissa’s only has a one-inch heel. So you two should be fairly close in the height department,” she explained to her.

“That was clever! But what’s the problem?” Melissa asked her.

“The problem is this. Both dresses were made to fit each of you. But I forgot to compensate for the height factor. Melissa’s dress is almost an inch longer than yours. So if you add the shoes, the height factor still might be a problem,” she told them.

“So what do we do? How do we fit it?” Melissa asked her.

“Well, I’m hoping that it won’t be a problem. But you’ll need to try them on so I can tell if we do have a problem or not,” she told them.

“That we can do,” Melissa told her.

“Okay, but you’ll need help to put these on. I can only help one of you at a time, so is there someone else that can help with the other dress?” she asked them.

Grady just looked at them. “Oh, no. I draw the line at helping two young ladies getting dressed,” he told them.

“Of course not. I was talking about another female,” Vi told him.

“I’ll help her,” Elizabeth said as she made her way into the kitchen, still wearing her robe. Little Katie followed her. She was still in her PJs.

Vi took one look at little Katie and then looked over at the other Katie. “My God, you two could almost be twins,” she told Katie.

“Vi this is my Aunt Elizabeth and my cousin Katie,” she said as she introduced them to each other.

“Well, the pleasure is all mine,” Vi told them.

“Well, I’ve heard some pretty good stories about you as well. Melissa tells me that you’re quite good with a needle and thread,” Elizabeth said.

“Well, keep in mind that my eyes aren’t what they used to be, and it’s getting harder and harder to use my fingers. But I want you to know that these dresses were all sewn by these two hands. And I’m sorry to say, but they’ll more than likely be my last ones too. Time is an evil companion of mine,” she told them.

“Well, we thank you more than you could ever know. Really, I mean that,” Katie told her.

“I know that, and as soon as I get done with another cup of this great tastin’ coffee, we’ll go upstairs and see if they fit you okay. I might have to make a few adjustments. But I’m really more concerned over this height issue,” she told them. Katie got the message as she took her cup and soon returned with a hot refill.

“Well, can we look at them?” Melissa asked her.

Vi just looked at the two of them and smiled. “No, you may not. It would ruin the surprise,” she told them.

Just then, another car pulled up outside. Katie glanced through the window to see Paul and Mary getting out of their car.

“Hey, Paul and Mary are here. Mary can help us with the dresses too,” Katie told them as she went to greet them at the door. Katie introduced them to Vi. And as she did so, she called him Uncle Paul and Aunt Mary. And everyone caught it but said nothing.

“Good, then I won’t be left down here with myself now, will I?” Grady said in a tone that caught everyone’s attention.

“Relax, Grady. I’ll stay down here with you,” Paul said as he turned to look at Katie. “Uncle Paul and Aunt Mary?” he asked her.

“Well, you’ve done as much as an uncle. Might as well have the title to go with it,” she told him with a smile.

“We’re honored for sure,” he answered.

“Well, if you ladies are ready, let’s see how these dresses fit the two of you,” Vi said as she stood up. Each girl grabbed the box that had their name on it. They were like two little kids on Christmas morning, and the

anticipation about the contents of their presents were about to make them explode.

“I think that you had better hurry. I’m not too sure just how long these two can hold out,” Grady told them.

“I see that. Gosh, girls, relax a bit,” Mary told them.

“Well, we’re really excited. This our wedding, and we just can’t wait to see what our dresses look like. You guys wouldn’t understand. It’s a girl thing,” Melissa responded.

“I realize that, but you two are going to work yourself up into a frenzy. And all you have to do is calm down a bit. And it just might take me a few minutes to get back up the stairs anyways,” Elizabeth told them.

“We know that, and we’re sorry for getting so wound up. But this is our day that we’re talking about. And I guess we kind of forgot that all of you that are helping to make it all happen,” Katie told them.

“Well, it’s okay, so what do you say that we go on upstairs, and we’ll see if they fit?” Elizabeth told them as she made their way to the stairs.

The five ladies slowly made their way up the stairs and disappeared behind Katie’s bedroom door.

Paul just looked at Grady. “What’s wrong? You look like you’ve just lost your best friend,” he told him.

“Oh, nothing, I just realized that my little girl is all grown up. It seems like just yesterday that her mom was giving her a bottle. Gee, how time flies,” he answered.

“Yeah, but here’s the question that you have to ask yourself. Excluding the tragic loss of your wife, is there anything that you would change?” he asked him.

“Already thought about it, and there’s not a single thing that I would change. I’m very proud of my little girl. She’s one surprise after another,” he told him.

“Exactly my point,” Paul told him.

Meanwhile upstairs in Katie's bedroom . . .

"All right now before we begin, I need to explain something to you two. These dresses were designed to be worn just one time. But they were also designed to show off your beauty as well as your body. You're both very beautiful girls, and these dresses will bring out your beauty. So put the shoes on first, and we need you both stripped down to just your underwear. Nothing on top, it will ruin the image that we're going to create," Vi told the two girls.

So Katie and Melissa stripped down to just their underwear and the shoes.

"Now, on Saturday, if you ladies wish to wear stockings, you'll have to do it with a garter belt. White so it doesn't show through the dress. Okay?" Vi told them.

They both agreed.

Now came the moment of truth. They would see their dresses for the very first time. And neither of them could have ever dreamed up a dress as stunning and as beautiful as the ones that Vi and Mary pulled from the boxes. Elizabeth just sat on the edge of the bed and watched in total amazement. "My God, they're beautiful!" she said as Mary and Vi held them up for the girls to see. Both girls soon had tears in their eyes.

"Now if you're going to start the crying bit, we'll just put them back in their boxes," Vi told them.

"I'm sorry, but they're just unbelievable," Katie told her as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Yeah, maybe, but the true magic will come when you put these on, and we cinch them up," Vi told them.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's do it," Melissa said.

Mary followed Vi's lead as she unzipped the zipper that ran down the back from the top of the collar, all the way down to the waist of the dress.

As Vi walked over to Melissa, she told her to put her hand on her shoulder and slowly slip into the dress. Mary did the same with Katie. And

they slowly pulled the dresses up so the girls could slide their arms down into the sleeves of the dress. And then they slowly zipped them up. The girls could feel the material of the dresses being pulled tighter against their bodies as the zipper traveled upward. Then Vi walked around to the front of the dress and started lacing a soft pink ribbon through the hoops on the V shape that ran down the front of the dress. After she was done, she and Mary just stepped back and took a look at the two beautiful ladies standing before them.

The dresses were themselves done in a very fine satin. The arms were done in a very sheer silk with a white lace undersleeve. At the wrist, the pattern was reversed, with the lace being on the outside and the sheer material on the inside. But it was the front of the dresses that caught all of the attention. The open V area of the dress was done in a very fine lace pattern, sewn over a layer of the fine sheer material. The lace did two things. It added a very feminine touch to the dress, but it also only revealed just enough of their breast to make them look both sexy and elegant at the same time. The light pink-colored ribbon that was laced across the opening added a touch of softness to the overall appearance of the dress itself. The collar of the dress was unique in that it could be worn in the lie-down position or in the upright position. In the lie-down position it would simply lay flat, but in the upright position, it stood about two inches high in the front and rising to four inches in the back. It gave the dress the appearance of royalty something like the queen of England was known to have worn. Soft accents of soft pink trim adorned the dress. As the girls walked to the mirror, they were surprised to find that the dresses also had a tail of about seven feet in length. Katie and Melissa just stared at each other.

“Well, what do you think?” Vi asked them.

“I don’t know what to say. I mean, I never once dreamed of anything like this,” Katie told her.

“I agree. I mean, these go well beyond words. What is there to say but thank you?” Melissa added.

“Well, now for the ultimate test. Mary, would you please take Elizabeth downstairs and tell the two gentlemen downstairs to prepare themselves for

these two beautiful ladies?” she asked her.

“I’d love to. But if I may say something first?” she asked.

“Sure, go ahead,” Vi told her.

“Let’s put their hair up first and put on the veils,” she answered.

“Oh my! Of course, I forgot all about the veils,” Vi said as she pulled one from each box.

A few minutes later, their hair was pinned up, and the veils were on. The veils were just as stunning as the dresses themselves. They were a very simple design. A metal band surrounded by padded satin, with a sheer material hanging down over the girls’ faces, with another much longer piece hanging down off of the back and darn near touching the floor. The veils would slide on from the front, and then the sheer fabric that made up the tail that was permanently attached to just one side of the satin band could be brought around and snapped into place on the other side. They were the finishing touches to the most elegant wedding dress ever to walk down the aisle. Lace gloves added to the overall package.

“Now you look simply stunning. You two have to be the most gorgeous brides to ever walk down the aisle,” Mary told them.

“Thank you, Mary. Aunt Elizabeth, what do you think?” Katie asked her.

“Well, Mike and Rick are two of the luckiest guys in the world. You two simply steal the show. You make me want to get married again just so I could look as good as you do,” she told them.

“That’s about the nicest compliment that I could ever expect. Thank you. All of you, but, Vi, words will never be able to tell you how I feel,” Katie replied.

“It’s all right. Seeing you dressed as you are is thanks enough. But if you think you look good today, just remember we haven’t done your hair, not properly anyways, and you’re not wearing any makeup yet. I think if you were to wear some off pink—or light lavender-colored lipstick it would just add to the overall effect,” Vi told them. “Now, Mary, if you would

please take Elizabeth downstairs, I'll join you in a second or two," she told them.

"You know, I have to agree about your choice in the color of their lipstick. It would add to the overall effect just like you said. So come on, Elizabeth, let's go get the men ready to be stunned," she said as she took her hand.

"Yes, I'd like to see the look on their faces as they see these two beautiful ladies as they come down the stairs," she replied.

# Katie and Melissa All Grown Up

The two women started downstairs. Vi turned and looked at the two brides. She placed the two of them next to each other and stepped back to the far side of the room. "Perfect! You two look almost the same size. That's a relief off of my mind. Now when you come down the stairs, this is what I want you to do. Both of you will stand at the top of the stairs, and you join hands like this," she said as she showed the girls where to place their hands. "And remember, just one step at a time together. Okay?"

"Got it. Hey, I can, or should say, we can never tell you just how we feel. And you made it possible. Thank you so very much," Katie told her.

"Yeah, what she said," Melissa added.

"Well, you're welcome. Now get ready for your grand entrance," Vi told them just as she turned to leave the room. Give us about five minutes or so to get the guys ready. Okay?"

"Five minutes, you've got it," Melissa told her.

Katie and Melissa were left in the room alone.

"Melissa you look simply fantastic. Thank you so much," Katie told her.

"Well, if I look half as good as you do, then I'm happy as hell," Melissa answered.

"Oh, Mike and Rick are going to be shocked beyond words," Katie added.

"You know it. And add the carriages and our vows and our wedding will set the standard, that's for sure," Melissa added.

"Without a doubt," Katie answered.

Meanwhile downstairs . . .

Grady looked at Mary and Elizabeth. "Well, do they fit?" he asked them.

“You’ll see. Prepare yourself for what’s coming. You’ll be shocked. That’s all I can say right now,” Elizabeth told him. “Where’s Katie?” she asked.

“She just finished breakfast. She’ll be back soon,” Grady told her.

“Well, she needs to see this. Really,” she told him.

“Relax, I think she’s washing her hands. She’ll be here,” Grady reassured her as Vi came down the stairs. The smile that she had on her face was unmistakable. She had done what she had set out to do, and she was more than pleased with the final results. That was obvious to everyone.

Little Katie came into the room and stood by her mom.

“Mom, where’s Katie?” she asked her.

“Relax, she’ll be down shortly,” she said to her.

Paul looked at his sister. “Well, what did you think?” he asked her.

“Look for yourself,” she told him. They all turned their eyes to the top of the stairs where Katie and Melissa stood.

Grady suddenly got a lump in his throat. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. His little girl that had just gone upstairs only about a half hour before had turned into a ravishing beauty. She definitely wasn’t a little girl any longer.

Little Katie summed all of their combined thoughts into one simple word. “Wow!” she said as she stared at her cousin. “Mom, look at Katie. She’s beautiful. She looks like a princess!”

“Yes, I know. They both do,” she replied.

Grady and Paul walked to the bottom of the steps to meet the two women as they slowly made their descent down the stairs.

“Oh my god, you two ladies look simply fantastic. I can’t believe these dresses,” Paul said as he took Melissa’s hand.

“I can. She looks just like her mother did. Of course, Katherine never had a dress quite like these. Simply breathtaking,” Grady said as he took his daughter’s hand in his.

“You really like it, Daddy?” Katie asked.

Grady turned to look at Vi. “I can’t believe that you’ve made these by hand. They’re simply fabulous. You should be very proud of your work,” he told her.

“Oh, I am. Trust me, I am,” she answered.

Little Katie walked up to her cousin. “You look like a princess. You’re beautiful,” she told her.

“Why, thank you, Katie. I feel beautiful,” she replied.

“What about me, Katie? How do I look?” Melissa asked the little girl.

“I think you both look like princesses—no, you look like queens. That’s it! You look like queens,” the little girl told them.

They all stood around for about thirty minutes admiring the dresses and the craftsmanship that went into them.

“All right, you two, time to take them off before anything happens to them,” Vi told them.

“I know that you’re right, but I just can’t get over how it makes me feel,” Katie told her.

“I know what you mean. I feel like a queen. Just like Katie said earlier,” Melissa added.

“Well, you can wear them all day but on Saturday, not today. So let’s go. Mary can I get your help again?” she asked.

“Sure, I’ll be right there,” she replied.

Thirty minutes after the girls had gone back upstairs, they all came back down. Katie and Melissa wore the clothes that they had on earlier.

“I don’t know about you, Mel, but I feel kind of naked in these clothes,” Katie told her.

“I know just what you mean. Those dresses made me feel like someone special. But it’s all gone now,” Melissa replied.

“It’s funny that a dress could change a person’s outlook on themselves just like that,” Katie told her.

“Don’t worry, girls, it will all be back here on Saturday. But then, everyone will get to see you in all of your glory. Now that will be something to see,” Elizabeth told them.

“She’s right you know? You two will be the center of attention come Saturday,” Mary added.

“Well, if that doesn’t make me just a wee bit nervous, then I guess nothing will,” Melissa replied.

“No kidding,” Katie added.

“So can I ask you two ladies just what you have planned for today?” Grady asked.

“Melissa and I are going to go see the judge and try to convince him into performing our wedding. Then I guess we have to go buy some lipstick, but other than that, nothing. Why do you ask?” Katie told her dad.

“Just wonderin’, that’s all. Paul and I are going over to the church and get the tables and chairs. What about you, Elizabeth, what do you have planned?” Grady asked her.

“Katie and I are going to the movies. Just the two of us, ain’t that right, dear?” she answered as she took her daughter’s hand in hers.

“That’s right, just me and my mom. We’re going to have fun together,” the little girl responded.

“Well, we’ll give you a ride,” Paul told her.

“Thanks, but no. I think we’ll just walk. I need to get some sunshine anyways,” she answered.

“Are you sure? I mean, can you handle walking that far?” Grady asked.

“I ain’t in the ground yet. Trust me, we’ll be fine. Ain’t that right, Katie?” she asked her daughter.

“That’s right. We’ll be just fine,” she answered.

“Okay then,” Grady said as he turned to look at Vi. “We do need to settle up for the dresses, so do you have a bill or something for me?” he asked her.

“Why, yes, I do. In fact, it’s right here in my purse,” she answered as she dug out the bill for the dresses. Once she found it, she handed it to him.

Grady took one look at the bill and then looked up at Vi. “This can’t be right. This wouldn’t even cover the cost of the materials,” he told her

“Yes, it does. And, yes, it is right,” she answered.

“Are you sure? You really deserve a lot more than this,” he told her.

“Melissa is and always has been a very dear and loyal friend. I cannot and will not charge such a friend labor fees. And as far as Katie’s dress goes, she’s my new friend,” Vi responded.

“Well, okay, but I’ll throw in a little something extra for your trouble,” he told her.

“You will not. Please don’t insult me that way. My prices are my prices. They are not negotiable, and neither are my standards, sir,” she told him in a very firm voice.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to insult you. So I guess this price will make you happy, and I guess that’s what I’ll pay you then,” Grady told her.

“Thank you, sir, you’re truly a gentleman for sure,” she responded.

“And you, my dear lady, are a blessing from heaven,” Grady told her.

“And that’s a compliment that I can take. Thank you, my kind sir,” Vi told him with a huge smile.

Everyone said thank you and their good-byes to Vi as she was leaving. She promised the girls that she would be back early Saturday morning to help the girls get ready for their big day.

“There goes one hell of a lady,” Grady said as her car headed down the gravel driveway.

“Well, I guess we’ll be going. I want to catch the judge before court starts, or we might have to wait until lunchtime to see him,” Katie told them

as she and Melissa walked to her car.

“You two be careful, and we’ll see you both back here for dinner. Maybe we’ll grill up some burgers for dinner,” Grady told the two girls.

“That sounds like a plan. Count us in,” Melissa told him as she started to drive away.

The entire twenty-minute drive to the courthouse was filled with talk about their dresses. As they walked up the steps that led to the courtroom, Katie could still feel how the dress had felt. She was sure that Melissa was still feeling it as well. The two girls walked up to the desk marked “Clerk of the Court.”

“Can I help you, miss?” the lady behind the desk asked.

“Yes, we’d like to see Judge Harlow on a personal matter,” Katie told her.

“Do you have an appointment?” the lady asked

“No, we don’t. But we really need to talk to him,” Katie told the lady.

“I’m sorry, miss, but the judge is a very busy man. You should have made an appointment,” the lady told them.

“Okay fine, Can we get an appointment to see the judge this afternoon then?” Melissa asked her.

“Let me see. No, I’m sorry my next open appointment to see the judge isn’t until Monday at two,” the lady answered.

“But that’s too late. Can’t you squeeze us in today please? It’s really important,” Katie told the lady.

“I’m sorry, miss, there’s not much I can do for you,” the lady answered.

Katie and Melissa were heartbroken. All of the plans, all of their dreams shattered because they didn’t have an appointment. They silently turned to walk away.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite lady, Katie Windslow,” a voice said from somewhere directly in front of her. Katie looked up to see Judge Harlow standing in front of her.

“Your Honor, we really need to see you, but this lady here says that we need an appointment,” Katie told him.

“Well you’re in luck. I haven’t even checked in yet. Got caught in some traffic,” the judge said as he turned to the lady behind the desk. “It’s all right, Nancy. Ms. Windslow doesn’t need an appointment. Follow me, ladies,” he told them as he just walked right on through to his office. As they entered his office, he turned to look at the two ladies before him. Melissa threw the lady behind the desk a look of defiance as she walked past her.

“Well, you’ll have to make this quick. I have to be in court in less than thirty minutes. So is this about Susie Barnes?” he asked Katie.

“No, Your Honor, it isn’t?” she answered back.

“Really? I would have thought that she would have been back in my court long before this. Gee, maybe I was wrong about her. Anyways, if this isn’t about her, what is this about?” he asked her.

Katie laid out all of their plans for the wedding and how Father Mathews wasn’t going to be able to perform the services and how everything depended on finding someone to perform the service.

“So let me get this straight. You want me to fill in for Father Mathews and perform your wedding services? Is that right so far?” he asked her.

“Yes, Your Honor. The wedding is this Saturday. And we’re really in a jam, sir. Can you do it?” she asked him.

“This Saturday? Boy, you don’t give a guy much warning, do you?” he asked.

“It wasn’t done on purpose, Your Honor,” Melissa added.

“Well, hang on there. Let me check my calendar and see if Saturday is open,” he said as he flipped the calendar open. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m supposed to play a game of golf with the governor on Saturday,” he told them.

Once again, all of their hopes and dreams were falling apart.

“Let me ask you one question, Ms. Windslow. I know that Susie shot her own father protecting you and your father, wasn’t it?” he asked her.

“Yes, Your Honor, she did. But what does that have to do with our wedding?” she asked.

“Nothing really. But I have to ask you. How could you possibly know that by dropping those charges against her, she would some day in the not too distant future come to your rescue like that?” he asked her.

“Well, I didn’t, Your Honor,” Katie told him.

“That’s what I thought,” the judge replied.

“But God did. And I knew that dropping those charges against her was just the right thing to do. God told me, Your Honor,” She told him.

“God told you?” he asked her.

Katie went on to explain about how the guys from that cave had changed their lives around all because of a little kindness that she had shown them that night in the cave.

“Really? You know what, Ms. Windslow? Your belief in God just moves me. You make me believe that there’s some good in all of us,” he told her

“Oh, but there is, Your Honor. You just have to find it, is all,” she told him.

“Well, back to your wedding. Hang on one minute and let me see if I can’t do something,” he told her as he picked up the phone. He didn’t say anything at first. “Yes, Nancy on Saturday, I have a golf game with the governor. Would you cancel it please and tell him that I’m sorry, but something really important has come up unexpectedly? We’ll set it up for another day. Thank you,” he said as he hung up the phone. “I want you to know, Ms. Windslow, that it took me over two years to set up that game of golf with the governor,” he told her.

“I can’t believe that you just did that just for us. I don’t know what to say,” Melissa told him.

"I can," Katie said. "You're a saint, Your Honor. Thank you so very much. I'll add you to my prayer list."

"You do that, and I'll see you two ladies come Saturday. And by the way, nice job on finding that treasure. I read about it in the *Charleston Herald*. Nice story, very nice indeed. In fact, there's been more than a few stories about you lately," he told her.

"Thanks again, Your Honor," Katie told him.

"You're welcome. Now git on out of here so I can go to work," he said with a huge smile on his face.

"We will, and thank you again," Katie said as she and Melissa turned to leave.

The drive home was filled with talk of their big day that was just two days away.

As they climbed into the car, Katie turned and looked at Melissa.

"Did you hear what the judge said about there being more than a few articles about us in the paper? I wonder what he was talking about," Katie asked her.

"I don't have a clue, but I think he was talking about articles about you, not us," Melissa responded.

"Ya think so? Maybe I should start reading the paper more often," Katie told her.

"Yeah, maybe you should at that. But do you know what we've forgotten?" Melissa asked Katie.

"No what have we forgotten?" Katie asked as if she didn't know. And she really didn't have a clue. Everything had been covered, or so she had thought.

"A rehearsal, dear. I mean do we really want to do this and hope that everyone does what they're supposed to do. And considering I'm not even sure what we're supposed to do, I would have to assume that nobody else does either," Melissa explained.

“My gosh, you’re right. We have all of these ideas and plans, but that’s all they are so far. Our wedding could really turn into a three-ring circus real fast,” Katie answered.

“Exactly. I think we’ll need to get everyone over to your place, say, tomorrow morning, and walk through all of this until we have it right,” Melissa suggested.

“I agree, but I don’t think tomorrow morning will work. Let’s set it up for tomorrow afternoon. It will give us a little more time to get everyone together,” Katie offered as a suggestion.

“Fine, but remember this, Katie, the wedding will only be about ten hours after our rehearsal. So we’ll have to nail it the first time. We won’t have the luxury of a retake. It’s really more like a do-or-die type of thing,” Melissa told her.

“Gee, thanks, Mel. You have very weird way of making me feel so much more relaxed,” Katie told her as she started to laugh.

“Well, just remember this. If we sink like a rock on Saturday, we’ll be going down together,” Melissa responded.

“Would you like to know what part of all of this just gets me the most?” Katie asked. “I mean, considering everything that we’ve been through from the moment that you stepped off of that train all the way up to now.”

“Sure, I’d like to know. Hell, we’ve been through a lot, haven’t we. So go ahead tell me which part it is that you like best,” Melissa told her.

“Well, not counting finding out that I have a little cousin that carries my name and seeing Aunt Elizabeth again, the part that I like the best is finding you as a friend, Melissa. Hell we act like we’ve known each other for years, instead of weeks. And it’s just a nice feeling if you know what I mean,” Katie told her.

Melissa just stared at Katie for a few moments. “Well thank you, Katie, that’s about the nicest thing that anyone has ever told me. And, yes, I do feel the same way about you too. And to be totally honest, I knew that we were going to be the best of friends the very moment that I saw you at the

train depot. There's just something about you that you carry so well. I can't put my finger on it, but it's there all right," Melissa replied.

"Not me, I remember. I was nervous as hell that day. I kept wondering, will you like me or will you hate me. Mike kept telling me to relax, but deep down inside, I was a nervous wreck. But that all disappeared the moment that I saw you. I just knew that all of my worries were for nothing," Katie told her.

"Do you remember what you told me that first day in the soda shop?" Melissa asked her.

"Which part?" Katie asked.

"The part where you wished that you could have as many friends as I did?" Melissa answered.

"Yeah, I do recall saying something to that effect. What about it?" she asked.

"Look around you, dear. Everyone in town knows you. Maybe not your face, but the name Katie Windslow gets attention around here. I would say that you've done quite well for yourself in the friends department," Melissa told her.

"You know, it's funny that you brought that up. Just the other day, I was thinking the same thing. It's a nice feeling to be so well liked," she replied.

"It's not that they like you, dear. It goes well beyond liking you—they admire you. You're strong, beautiful, and every time you turn around, you're making more and more new friends. And of course, you have that ability to see the good in everyone. You know how you keep turning a turd into a diamond thing. You're in a class all by yourself, Katie Windslow, and I'm glad to be your friend," Melissa told her.

"Friends today but soon to be sister-in-laws for life," Katie responded.

"Very true and very well put too, I might add," Melissa said as she pulled the car into the parking lot of the drug store.

"Come on, let's go do what women do best. Let's go shopping," Melissa told her as she got out of the car.

“Oh, I’ve got this part down pat. Men just don’t understand what happens when a woman goes shopping,” Katie responded.

“Rick and Mike soon will. They’ll be paying the bills, remember?” Melissa asked.

“Oh, I do. I just wonder if they know it yet,” Katie responded as she walked into the store with Melissa right on her heels.

# At the Movie House

Katie and Elizabeth sat in the middle of the movie house, staring up at the screen. They were watching a cartoon about a mouse that was a captain of a boat when Katie turned in her seat to look at her mom.

“Mom, are you sure the doctors can’t help you?” she asked.

Elizabeth just looked at her daughter. She knew that sooner or later, she would have to explain everything in more detail to her. This was as good of a time as any she supposed.

“Katie, there’s nothing that anyone can do. If we would have found it earlier, maybe, but we didn’t,” she answered.

“Does it hurt?” Katie asked.

“Sometimes. But I have medicine to help with the pain,” she answered.

“I knew something was wrong. I heard you crying at night. I prayed to God to make you better, but he didn’t hear me, I guess,” her daughter told her.

“Katie, God heard you, sweetheart,” Elizabeth told her.

“Then why aren’t you better? If he heard me, then why doesn’t he answer my prayers?” Katie asked her.

“Because answering your prayers may not go along with his bigger plan, sweetheart. Maybe I’m supposed to go to heaven and be with your father. Maybe by my dying, you’ll grow up to be a stronger and better person sweetheart. I don’t know what God’s plans are. Nobody does. But we have to believe that God knows what he’s doing. So we put our faith in him to lead us. Do you understand, dear?” she asked.

“Yeah, I guess so. But I don’t want you to die and go to heaven. I want you to stay here with me. Always,” Katie told her.

“So do, I dear. So do I. But what we want doesn’t really matter. But I’ll tell you this. For the last ten years, I’ve watched our little baby grow up into

a fine little girl. And every day, I watched you growing and changing along the way. And just like me, I know that your daddy is watching you too,” she told her daughter.

“What was he like, Mom?” Katie asked.

“Who are you asking about? Your father?” she asked.

“Yeah, what was Dad like?” Katie asked.

“Oh, your daddy was a fine man. He was funny and a very good provider for us. But if there’s one quality that would set your daddy apart from the others, it would be his honesty. Your father was a very proud man. And he never took more than he deserved, never. I admired him for that. He loved his family so much. And when he found out that we were going to have a baby, he was so excited that I thought he might explode. He was running around telling anybody and everybody. And your father knew that you were going to be a girl. He just knew. And he told me that he was going to name you after his favorite niece, and he did just that. And I have to say that you look just like her,” Elizabeth told her.

“I like my cousin. She’s pretty and funny too. But it just won’t be the same . . . I mean without you,” Katie told her mom.

“I know, sweetheart, and I’m sorry. I really am. But Katie will take really good care of you, dear. And you’ll grow into a strong and beautiful woman just like her,” Elizabeth told her.

“I really love my cousin, Mom, but I don’t want to grow up to be like her,” Katie told her.

“But, dear, why not? She’s pretty and smart and—” Katie cut her off.

“I want to be like you. You’re the person that I want to be like. No offense to her, but I want to be just like you,” Katie told her.

There were no words that could express the love between the two of them. Elizabeth just took her daughter into her arms and hugged her, and Katie returned the hug.

Whatever was happening on that picture screen didn’t matter at all, at least not to the two of them.

Katie broke away from her mother's hug.

"Mom, will you know when it's time? I mean before you leave me, will you know?" she asked her mom.

"I don't know. Maybe, why do you ask?" she asked.

"So I can have just one more hug, one more kiss, and so I can tell you that I love you just one more time. Please could you do that for me? I mean if you know that it's time," Katie replied.

The tears swelled up in Elizabeth's eyes as she stared down at her daughter. "Sure, Katie, I can do that for you. I wouldn't want to go any other way, dear. I love you so much," Elizabeth told her as she brushed her hair from her eyes and wiped away the tears from her little girl's cheeks.

"I love you too, Mom. And thanks for coming to the movies with me. It really means a lot," Katie told her.

"I'm glad that I came. Now be a big girl and eat your popcorn," she told her as she herself took a handful from the bucket.

The two of them spent the entire day together. After the movie was over, they enjoyed a malted at the malt shop and even found time to spend some time at the park. And while Elizabeth didn't really have the energy to play with Katie in a way that she would have wanted to, she found it very entertaining and enjoyable just to watch Katie playing with the other kids. And just like clockwork, about every twenty minutes or so, Katie would check on her mom, and once she knew that her mom was okay, she would be off and running again. On the way home, Katie looked up at her mom.

"Mom, do you think that there's parks in heaven?" she asked her.

"Well, gee, Katie, I don't know. I suppose that they do. But what made you ask that?" she inquired.

"Well, that way when I get up to heaven, all of us can go to the park together. Just you, Dad, and me. Wouldn't that be great?" she asked.

"I guess that would be fun. But what if you're an old lady by the time you get to heaven? Will you still want to go play in the park?" Elizabeth asked her.

“Never thought about that before, but I don’t think you could ever be so old that you wouldn’t enjoy a day at the park,” Katie told her.

“That’s true. I guess. Just how did you ever get to be so darn smart?” she asked.

“Just taking after you, I suppose,” she replied as she squeezed her mom’s hands just a tad harder.

# Mattersonville's Surprise

Katie and Melissa hurried back to Katie's after they had finished doing their shopping. Their plan was to drop Katie off so she could call some of the people that were going to be in the wedding and inform them of the rehearsal. While Melissa drove around and told those that didn't have a phone. They hoped that everyone could be there no later than one in the afternoon.

But their plans were soon dashed the moment that they had entered the driveway to Matterson House. The guys had definitely been busy. Surely, they must have had some outside help, for all of the chairs had been lined up in their neat little rows and a giant archway was covered in white, purple, and pink flowers. It was this archway that the two brides would enter as they exited the two carriages and made their ways up to the podium where Mike and Rick, their husbands, to be would be waiting for them. Two large white columns were on either side of the podium. Each of those were topped with large vases that held even more flowers that matched those found in the arch.

Their pathway leading through the arch was something that neither of the two ladies had expected. The actual pathway had been constructed out of wood. Prior to the archway, it was at ground level, but it rose up at a very gradual rate. By the time it entered through the arch, the pathway itself was almost two feet off of the ground. The flooring was done in thick plywood and covered in a very deep dark purple carpet. The total length of the walkway was nearly sixty feet long. Rising up from both sides of the wooden walkway was a wooden handrail that ran from the archway itself all the way up to the square stage where the podium was erected. Both handrails were covered again in white paint and was decorated with the same flowers as the arch was.

Behind the podium was equally as impressive. The stage itself was almost twenty feet across and maybe ten feet wide. From the very back corners of the stage, another much larger arch had been erected and filled in

with white lattice. It was smothered in more pink, purple, and white flowers.

Katie and Melissa just got out of the car and silently walked toward the huge display. Neither of them said a word. They simply could not believe what they were seeing. There was no possible way this all could have been done in less than three hours. No way.

“Well, what do ya think?” Grady asked as he stepped out from behind the stage.

“How . . . did you . . . I mean where did this all come from?” Katie asked.

“Grady, what can I say . . . it’s so overwhelming. You have simply outdone yourself this time,” Melissa added.

“What? You think I did all of this? I would love to take the credit for all of this, but believe me, I had nothing to do with it,” he told them.

“But who then? I mean, if you didn’t do it, then who?” Katie asked.

Then from the stage where Grady had emerged, out stepped the mayor of Mattersonville, William Scott. “Maybe I should explain all of this to you two. You see, when a city or town such as Mattersonville has two of its favorite ladies getting married, especially in a double wedding such as yours, we just have to take notice. You two ladies . . . along with your dad here and your boyfriends too have done so much for this quiet peaceful town . . . and never have you ever asked for anything in return. It’s always been about helping other people, with no thoughts of yourselves. So when it was confirmed that you two were to be married here in Mattersonville, we held a special town meeting, and everyone in town agreed to chip in and help make your wedding simply the best.

“Everything that you see here was paid for by the residents of this very grateful town. And for the last two weeks, everyone made time to go over to the Petersen place and help build it. But it was the kids in our schools that did all of the painting. Then this morning, we brought it all over here and reassembled it. So on behalf of everyone here in Mattersonville, this is their way of saying thank you to all of you,” he told them.

“You mean everyone in town did this for us?” Katie asked.

“Yes, and I do mean everyone. From the kids in our schools to the firefighters, the teachers, the city workers, everyone did something to help pull all of this together for you all. But I’m warning you, there’s even more surprises coming your way on Saturday,” he told them.

“More surprises? Like what? I really don’t know what to say,” Melissa told him.

“There’s nothing to say. But if you really want to say thank you to everyone, then I guess you’ll have to do on Saturday because unofficially, Mattersonville, Georgia, will be closed on Saturday so everyone can be here,” he told them.

“Everyone? You’re kidding, right?” Katie asked as she looked at the chairs.

“Oh you’ve noticed that there isn’t enough chairs. You’re right, but we’re taking care of that. More chairs are on the way as we speak,” he told her.

“Oh I wasn’t thinking about the chairs. I was thinking about how everyone in this town has treated me and my daddy since we moved here. I’ve never seen anyone here with less than a smile on their faces, and they’ve always taken the time to say hi or how ya doing. I knew that we made a smart choice the day we moved into Matterson House, and even if we hadn’t found any treasure, Mattersonville would still be our home. I just love it here,” Katie told the mayor.

“Well, welcome to the south. After all, hospitality is our trademark, so to speak. But you’re the ones that have livened up this town. From Melissa’s homecoming party to your discovery, it was never about you. It was about everyone else. And you’ve done it time and time again. So how else could the people of Mattersonville say thank you. And, Mellissa, I don’t want you to think that this is all because of Katie. No, sir, you have been the apple of our eye for a very long time even before Ms. Windslow got here,” he told her.

“I know that, but it’s weird that this is all happening. Just a few hours ago, Katie said that she had a lot of friends in this town, and I told her that she has a lot more than she thought. Gee, I guess I was right, wasn’t I?” she told them.

“You have no idea just how right you are, dear. In fact, I have something here to show the both of you. I think you’ll get a kick out of this,” the mayor said as he reached into his jacket and pulled out several pieces of paper that had been rolled up with a rubber band around it. He took off the rubber band and handed half of the papers to each of the girls.

“These were done by, I believe, our fourth grade art class. This alone should tell you how everyone feels about you,” he told them as he watched the two ladies start looking at them.

As the two women unrolled the papers, they got a very pleasant surprise. The students had drawn pictures of what they thought Katie and Melissa would look like in their wedding dresses. There were roughly twenty pictures in all. And every one of them was signed by the student that had drawn them and everyone also carried the words “We love you, Katie and Melissa.”

Both girls were lost in themselves as they studied the drawings that they presumed had been drawn by the girl students. Then Katie saw the name at the bottom of one of the pictures. She started laughing a bit.

“What’s the matter, Katie?” her daddy asked.

“This one is signed Bobby,” she said as the tears started flowing again.

“Bobby? Oh that little boy that you danced with, the one that has a crush on you?” her daddy asked.

“Yeah, my little Romeo. But just wait until he meets little Katie. He’s going to fall head over heels for her. That’s for sure,” she said as she went back to looking at the drawings.

“These are simply remarkable. I’ve been caught totally off guard. I mean, first by all of this stuff that they’ve built for our wedding and then by these drawings,” Melissa told him.

“Well, all I can say is you’re welcome. It’s the town’s way of saying thank you to all of you,” the mayor told her.

“Well, we’re honored for sure, but they didn’t have to do all of this really. A simple card would have said just as much. All of this is so nice, but I think it’s not that they actually did it. It’s just the fact that they thought about doing it. That’s the part that brings the tears to my eyes,” Katie told the mayor.

“Well, your dad here knew about all of this back when it was on the drawing table. At first, he told them no thanks, but after he heard the townspeople’s arguments, I guess he gave in and said okay,” the mayor told her.

Katie turned to look at her daddy.

“You knew about all of this? Wait a second. Of course you did, didn’t you? That’s why you offered to handle all of the wedding plans, isn’t it?” she asked him.

“Well, I guess you’ve found out my little secret. But really you have no idea, no clue at all, as to what this all consists of. There’s so much more that you won’t see until Saturday. Trust me, the townspeople have exceeded even my wildest expectations,” he told his daughter.

“You’re kidding, right? What more could they possibly do that they haven’t done already?” she asked.

“Well, all I can say if you let your imagination go, you’ll still be impressed. But I will tell you this, Mike and Rick are getting the treatment too,” Grady told his daughter.

“Mike and Rick? That reminds me, where are they?” she asked.

“Yeah, do the guys know about all of this too?” Melissa asked.

“Nope, they haven’t a clue. But in regard to as to where they are, they’re with Paul and Mary. And you will be surprised come Saturday, trust me.”

“So let me see if I understand all of this. The townspeople have pretty much taken over our wedding, and we’re supposed to sit back and do

nothing and put our wedding dreams into their hands? Is that it?" Katie asked.

"No, not at all. This is your wedding, and all the townspeople have done is taken your dreams, your plans, and added something to it. You all still have the final say-so, but when you see what they have done, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised," the mayor told her.

"Oh, don't think for one second that I'm ungrateful 'cause you would be mistaken. But it's just so much to take in . . . the stage . . . the woodwork . . . all of those beautiful flowers, and then these fabulous drawings . . . I'm just so taken in by their efforts. To simply say thank you could never be enough. Ain't that right, Mel?" she asked.

"I don't think I could have said it any better than that. And you said that you didn't have any friends in this town," Melissa answered.

"Yeah, but you'll have to admit it. You never expected all of this, did ya?" Katie asked.

"No, I didn't, not even in my wildest dreams," Melissa responded.

"Well, would you like to take a guess as to who came up with idea in the first place?" the mayor asked the two girls.

"Yes, I would. Whose idea was this?" Katie asked.

Grady put his hand on his daughter's shoulder. "This all is the idea of one of your friends that you used to hate, then you became friends with, and then she decided that being in your wedding wouldn't be the best idea. This was all her doing," her daddy told her.

"This was all Susie's idea? You're kidding?" she asked both her daddy and the mayor.

"Exactly, and when she first approached me with the basic idea, I thought that she was just a bit crazy. Then I started thinking about it and decided to take it before the town council, and well, the rest is history," the mayor told the both of them.

"Susie Barnes? Gee, did I underestimate her," Melissa told them.

“Well, when little Katie came into the picture, Susie told me that she couldn’t face her, knowing that her dad was responsible for her daddy’s death and all. So she pulled herself out of the wedding party to avoid any ill feelings. She told me that she would make it up to me, but I never expected this. Never,” Katie told them.

“Remember what I told you about your ability of turning a turd into a diamond? Boy, did I get that one right! Or what?” Melissa asked her.

“I would say that you hit that one right on the mark,” Katie answered.

“Oh, by the way, I did do something that you both should know about I guess,” Grady told them.

“And what would that be?” his daughter asked.

“Well, it dawned on me that you needed some type of practice, you know like a rehearsal of some type, so I took the liberty of inviting everyone over here tomorrow at ten if that’s all right?” Grady asked.

Melissa and Katie just looked at each other. Then Katie turned to her daddy. “You read our minds. Ten o’clock will be just fine,” she answered.

“But if you don’t mind me asking, Grady, where or how did you come up with the names of everyone in the wedding party?” Melissa asked.

“Well, that was actually easier than I thought that would be. Mary, it seems, takes very good notes,” he answered.

“Good ole Aunt Mary, I should have guessed,” Melissa responded.

Katie was looking around at the stage area, and she noticed that there were about ten chairs that had a red ribbon across them. None of the other chairs had this. So she turned to the mayor.

“What’s the deal with the red ribbon? Who are they reserved for?” she asked.

“Well, actually we had just finished putting that there when we saw you drive through the gate. It would seem that a certain judge had to cancel a golf game with a certain someone. Well, I guess right after you left his office, he sent a messenger over here to tell us that his golf partner would

like to be included on the guest list, so those are for him and his family,” he told her.

“You’re kidding! The governor is coming here? To our wedding?” she asked.

“Well, I don’t know about that. But if that’s who Judge Harlow was supposed to play golf with, then I would have to say yes,” he answered.

“Oh my God, the governor is coming to our wedding!” Melissa said out loud.

“Okay, relax, girls. After all, he’s just another guest,” Grady told them.

“Just another guest? Are you serious? I mean, he’s the governor. He hardly rates as just another guest. God, I hope I don’t do anything stupid like tripping or falling. How tragic would that be? It was bad enough when it was just all of the townspeople, but now it’s the governor too,” Katie said as she got this mental picture of her falling off of the stage on her head.

“Relax, Katie, you’ll be fine. Trust me,” the mayor told her.

“That’s easy for you to say. After all, you won’t be the one that will have ten thousand eyes fixed on you. It will just be me and Katie up there. And I’m nervous already. I hate to see how nervous we’ll be on Saturday,” Melissa responded.

“Well, a couple of shots of some good ole Kentucky whiskey will calm you both right down,” Grady told them with a smile across his face.

“Oh, yeah, we’ll be nervous wrecks as it is, so why not make us two drunk nervous wrecks?” Katie replied.

“Well, at least you wouldn’t feel it if you should fall off of the stage,” Grady added.

“Daddy, you’re not helping. Really!” Katie told him.

They all turned toward the driveway as they heard a car entering the drive. It was Paul’s car. Mary and Paul were in the front seat with Mike and Rick taking up the rear seat. As the car came to a stop, all four of them got out and stared at the massive structure before them. Paul and Mary both

knew what was coming but never dreamed it would be anything like this. But Mike and Rick had no knowledge of anything before now.

“Where did all of this come from?” Mike asked.

“Me and Melissa built it. Do you like it?” Katie asked him.

“No, seriously. Where did it come from?” he asked again.

“What? You don’t believe the two of us could build this? Why? Because we’re girls?” she asked.

Mike just looked at her. “Oh, you could of . . . if you would have had the time . . . and maybe some help. But this is just too much for the two of you to do so quickly,” he told her.

Rick never said a word. He just walked quietly by everyone. When he got to the base of the ramp, he turned and looked at his future wife. “Honey, what’s going on here? Where did all of this come from?” he asked her.

“Well, it’s kind of like a giant gift,” she told him.

“A gift, a gift from who?” Mike asked.

“Well, it’s kind of hard to explain. But basically, it’s from everyone,” Melissa told the two of them.

“All right, quit beating around the bush. Who did this?” Rick asked the two girls that stood in front of him.

“Just like Melissa said, it’s a gift from everyone,” Katie answered.

Mike turned toward Grady. “Grady, would you please explain just what’s going on here? Where did this all come from?” he asked.

“Well, why don’t you ask him?” Grady said as he pointed toward the mayor.

Mike and Rick both turned and looked at the mayor. “Well, can you explain all of this?” Mike asked.

“Sure, I can. Just like the two ladies told you, it’s a gift from everyone,” he told the two guys.

“Okay, I get it. It’s a surprise right? And you can’t tell us who did this because?” Rick asked the mayor.

“We just told you where it all came from. It’s from everyone,” the mayor responded again.

“We got that part, but who is everyone?” Mike asked.

“Everyone who lives in Mattersonville,” Katie told him.

Mike turned to look at Katie. “Excuse me! But are you saying that everyone in town had a hand in this? Are you serious?” he asked.

“Oh, she’s serious all right,” the mayor told him. And then he started to explain to the two gentlemen the same story that he had explained to Katie and Melissa just a short time earlier. Mike and Rick just stood there and listened as the mayor slowly explained everything. As the mayor explained everything, the two men just couldn’t believe what they were hearing. Their eyes kept darting back and forth, between the mayor and the giant display that stood before them. The two guys just stood there in complete silence for a few seconds after the mayor finished explaining everything.

“Wait a second, so what you’re telling us is the entire town did this for us?” Mike asked.

“Isn’t it just too much? I mean, look at these pictures that some of the schoolkids drew of me and your sister,” Katie told him as she handed him the pictures.

“These are just super. This is just too much,” Mike said as he said as he looked through the pictures. Rick was looking at the pictures that Melissa had.

“Oh, you haven’t heard the best part yet. Katie, I’ll let you tell them about our special guest,” Melissa told her.

“Oh yeah, see those chairs over there that have a red ribbon on them? Would you like to take a guess on to whom they’re for?” Katie asked him.

“Hell, I don’t know, maybe the president,” he said half laughing.

“Oh, get real, Michael. It’s not the president. But you’re close,” Katie told him.

"I was just kidding. I really don't know who they're for," Mike confessed.

"What about you, Rick? Care to take a guess?" Katie asked him.

"Not me, I don't have a clue," he responded.

"Well, are you guys ready for this? The governor is coming to our wedding," Katie told them.

"The governor? Are you serious?" Rick asked.

"Yeah, I am. The governor of the state of Georgia is coming to our wedding," Katie answered.

"Really? That's cool, but why is he coming here?" Rick asked.

"Well, it seems that he was supposed to be playing golf with Judge Harlow, but the judge cancelled the game so he could perform our wedding, and well, I guess the governor didn't have anything else to do, so he's coming here," Melissa explained.

"Oh, so you got the judge to do it? That's great. I was hoping you would be able to convince him to help us," Mike told them.

"Oh, there's something else you need to know. You'll never guess whose idea this was," Melissa told them.

"Knowing your dad, it wouldn't surprise me to find out that he had a hand in this," Mike said as he put his hand on Grady's shoulder.

"Hey, don't put all of this on me. But you'll be surprised when you hear who it was," Grady told him.

"Can I take a guess at this?" Rick asked.

"Sure, hon, take your best guess," Melissa told him.

"Don't ask me why, but I get this funny feeling that Susie had something to do with this," he told them.

"Susie? That's the most farfetched thing that you have ever said in the twenty-some odd years that I've known you, Rick. Susie Barnes? Yeah that

will be the day,” Mike said just as he noticed that everyone was staring at him, including the mayor himself.

“What? No way. You mean he’s right? I don’t believe it,” Mike told them in his defense.

“Well, you have better believe it ’cause he’s right,” Katie told him.

“You’re kidding, but how?” he asked.

“Well, she brought the idea to my attention, and I took the idea to the town council, and like I told the girls, the rest is history,” the mayor told him.

“Boy, do I feel like a horse’s ass right about now!” he told them.

“That’s all right, dear, as long as you don’t act like one on Saturday,” Katie told him with a grin on her face.

“Yeah, I agree. And according to the mayor, there’s still more surprises coming on Saturday. But he won’t tell us what they are,” Melissa told him.

“More surprises? What else could they possibly do to add to all of this?” Rick asked.

“Well, I guess you’ll all have to wait until Saturday ’cause I’m not going to tell ya. And besides, I need to be going. I do have a city to run. So if you’ll all excuse me, I’ll be leaving,” the mayor told them as he started walking toward his car.

“Before you go, I’d like to say thank you again. I mean, if you hadn’t taken Susie’s idea to the town council, then none of this would have happened,” Katie told him.

“Ms. Windslow, had I not taken this idea before the town council, I would most likely be looking for a new job right about now. But seriously, it’s an honor to be the mayor of such a town as this one. The people here are the most giving, lovable people on the planet. And of course, after you all moved in, things have just exploded almost overnight. And I do mean that in a good way too. I mean look at us now—Matterson House is going to be a national historical site and a national park and the treasure that you’ve all found here. Oh, yes, Mattersonville will be visited by hundreds of

Americans that are eager to explore the past. And you all started it. So what else can I tell you? Except thank you. All of you. This isn't about the doings of just one single person. No, it's about all of you and everything that you've given us," the mayor told all them as he stood before them.

"Well, if I might interject here? We really didn't do all that much I reckon. After all, we just found what someone else hid, is all," Grady told the mayor.

"That's true enough. But take those so-called gopher holes for an example. For years, most of us stayed away from there just because of those so-called gopher holes. Had even one of us ever decided to check it out or try to chase away the gophers, then the story would be a lot different than it is now. But nobody ever did. That was until you all came along and discovered that there wasn't any gophers at all," the mayor explained.

"Well, I'll agree with you on just a part of that. There are a lot of times when people will see things that they may not understand or something that just looks out of place. But they decide that it isn't their problem, or for what reason, they choose to walk away. But then someone will take the time to check it out after no one else would, and they make the discovery of a lifetime. Just like the gopher holes," Katie explained.

"Yeah, but it's those people that didn't take the time to take a better look that are the first to complain the minute a discovery is made," Melissa added.

"That's exactly my point. You all are the ones that took the time to check out everything. And mind you, you did have access to all of those documents that pointed you in the right direction more or less. But you still took the time and exerted the effort to not only finding the missing pieces of the puzzle. You solved the puzzle as well. And like I said before, this was all done for the enrichment of others, and not yourselves. Now, I'm not sure how every other American feels, but for me, that makes you all heroes in my book," the mayor told them.

"Heroes? Don't know about that really. For me, when I got brought into all of this, I was looking forward more to the thrill of the hunt than anything else," Mike added.

“Even so, but you still took the time and kept pushing to find the answers that solved the puzzle. I can only imagine what you all were thinking and feeling when all of this all started to fall together. But you all deserved it. Just because you took the time to do whatever was required of you to get it done. And if I remember right, wasn’t it something like ninety years that this secret had remained hidden? That’s a very long time, but it might have been another hundred years if you all hadn’t come along,” the mayor told them.

“Yeah, but looking back, it was a combination of a lot of little things that all added up together to give us the answers that we were looking for. It was both exciting and nerve-racking at the same time,” Grady added.

“I’m sure that it was all that and more. But you all stayed on course, and well, that’s why they call it history I guess. Look, I can stand here all day and talk about how exciting it all must have been, but I really do need to be going. We’ll have time to talk more later,” the mayor replied.

“Yes, we do understand that you really need to leave, but let me say this first. When I first choose American history as my major, a lot of people asked me why. They even joked about the fact that history has no future in it. Well, I can now tell all of them that they were wrong. History in fact is the key to our future. If we don’t remember history and remember what happened back then and why, then it’s possible that we could go on reliving it time and time again. We learn from our past so we can make our futures better,” Melissa told him.

“Melissa dear, you’re a very bright woman. And that is so true. History, the key to our future. Now that’s something that I might quote you on, if I may?” he asked her.

“You certainly may indeed,” she told him as they all watched him getting into his car.

“Well, good day to all of you. I’ll be seeing you all on Saturday. It’s going to be one hell of a party, that’s for sure,” he said as he put his car into gear and slowly started to drive away.

They all watched as he drove away.

“So what do we do now?” Katie asked as she looked at the giant structure before them.

“Don’t know about the rest of you, but I need a drink,” Grady told them.

“Ya know what? That sounds very tempting. Care if I join you?” Michael asked. Everyone turned to look at him.

“What?” he asked them. “It’s just a drink.” Nobody said a word.

“Paul, Mary, would you care to join Michael and I for a drink?” Grady asked.

“I’d love to,” Paul answered.

“None for me. You drink and I’ll drive,” Mary responded.

“That’s my sister for ya. Always looking out for me,” Paul responded.

“Well someone has to,” she said with a slight giggle to her voice.

Melissa looked down the driveway just in time to see Elizabeth and Katie coming through the gate.

“Well, look who finally made it home?” she said as everyone turned to see who it was.

Grady and Paul both looked at Elizabeth. They could tell that she wasn’t doing too well. They ran over to her.

“Elizabeth, are you okay?” Grady asked her.

“Oh, a little tired perhaps, but I think I’ll survive. Boy, have you all been busy or what?” she said as she looked over at the large wooden creation before them.

“Well, come on inside. I’ve got one hell of a story to tell you,” Grady told her as him, and Paul helped her into the house.

Little Katie ran up to her bigger cousin. “Katie, Mom and me, we went to the movie house and the ice cream parlor and the park,” she told her with so much excitement in her voice.

“You did? Did you have fun?” Katie asked her little cousin.

“Oh, yeah, but Mom started getting tired at the park. So we had to come on home. But it was the very bestest day of my life,” she told her cousin.

“Well, I’m happy for the both of you,” Katie answered.

Little Katie just stared at the wood structure that stood before her. “Wow, that’s beautiful! Did your daddy build that for your wedding?” she asked her bigger cousin.

“No, my daddy didn’t, but our friends did,” Katie told her.

“Wow, you must have some nice friends,” she told her.

“You have no idea,” Katie told her.

# Whiskey Shots

The two Katies followed the rest of the people into the house. Little Katie took off toward her bedroom. And Katie joined the other adults at the dining room table. Grady brought out a bottle of Ole Kentucky Whiskey and six glasses. The glasses clinked together as he sat them down.

“Why six glasses, Daddy?” Katie asked.

“Just in case, dear, just in case,” he told her.

“Just in case of what?” she asked

“Just in case you and Melissa decided to join in the festivities,” he told her as he sat down at the table across from her.

“I wouldn’t count on it, Daddy dear,” she replied

“Hey, you never know. You might,” Grady replied.

“Oh, come on, Katie, if you try it, so will I,” Melissa told her.

“Melissa, are you in cahoots with my daddy here to get me drunk?” she asked.

“Not at all. But why should the guys have all of the fun. You really need to loosen up a bit,” Melissa fired back.

“Me? If I remember right. You’ve never had alcohol before either,” Katie responded.

“That’s exactly my point. We should at least try it before we pass judgment,” she replied.

“Well, maybe just one, but that’s it. Just one,” Katie told them.

“That’s my girl. Grady, two for the ladies if you would please,” Melissa asked him.

Grady just looked at the two girls. “Are you sure you really want to do this?” he asked.

“Well, you can’t get drunk off of one drink, can you?” Katie asked.

“Well, you might, I reckon, but I’ll give you a small one first,” he told her.

“What do you mean by first? I’m only having the one remember?” she asked him.

“Yeah right. I hope you’ll remember that in the morning,” he told his daughter.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“Nothing, just making a statement. That’s all,” he told her as he poured the two ladies their first drink. He filled the two glasses only half full. He watched as the two ladies took the glasses and stared at them.

“So are you going to drink them, or just have a staring contest with them?” Michael asked them.

Melissa looked at Katie.

“Well on the count of three, okay?” she asked.

“Fine, whatever. You do the counting, Michael,” she told him.

“Okay, ladies. One . . . two . . . three!” he told them as both of the ladies raised the glasses to their lips, tilted their heads back, and downed the entire drink in one gulp.

Katie and Melissa both thought that their throats and their stomachs were on fire as the whiskey ran down their throats. Their eyes got the size of silver dollars, and their mouths opened up like a Louisiana big mouth bass.

“Oh . . . God . . . that was terrible!” Katie said as she fought back the tears from her eyes that were starting to form. Melissa didn’t say a word. But she too had the same thoughts.

“Well, you weren’t supposed to down it, silly. That’s sipping whiskey,” Grady told them.

“Oh . . . great . . . now you tell me. Wow! I think my stomach is on fire,” Katie told him.

“Here, try another one. It will make the effects of that first one a lot better. But remember, just sip this one,” he told the two girls as he refilled their glasses. Again, they were only half full.

Katie knew what to expect. Or so she thought. She took a small sip of the whiskey. It was strong all right, but not nearly as strong as the last one. But still, there was this disgusting taste in her mouth. So she took a long deep look at the glass in her hand and downed it again.

“Katie, you’re supposed to be sipping it. Not downing it,” Grady told her.

She slapped her hand down on the table. “Damn, that’s terrible stuff. But you’re right, the second was better than the first one,” she proudly proclaimed.

“You didn’t hear me, did ya? You’re supposed to be sipping it. Are you trying to get yourself drunk or just sick?” Grady asked her.

“Well, it goes down better if you don’t let it touch your tongue. Pour me another. I think I’m past the worse part,” she told her dad.

“Katie, are you sure that you want another?” Michael asked her.

“Quite sure, and by the way, you haven’t even touched yours yet,” she replied.

“Well, I’ve been busy watching you,” he told her.

“Well, drink up or shut up. How about another refill if you please, Daddy,” she told him.

Grady poured her another. Again only halfway full.

“Fill it up please,” she asked.

Grady did as she requested. “Honey, I really think that you might want to consider slowing it down a bit.”

“I’m getting married, Daddy. I’m a big girl now,” she said as she downed her third drink. Melissa was going to keep up with her but just not as quick as she was doing it.

“Oh, lordie, that’s strong stuff. But it does taste better as you go on,” she said as she slammed the glass down on the table.

“Katie, I think you’ve had enough now. Just sit there a while and let it sink in. Okay?”

“What? I feel perfectly fine. You guys are lightweights,” she told them.

“Yeah, I bet you do, or will,” Michael told her.

“I really don’t see what all of the hype is all about. Three drinks and I’m perfectly fine. Really!” she proudly proclaimed.

Everyone except for Katie and Melissa knew that it was only a matter of time before it really hit her. Katie sat there absorbing the pleasures of her labor.

“You guys are weaklings. I’m going to go get me some ice tea,” she told them.

Grady was just about to tell her not to stand up, but he wasn’t fast enough. As soon as she stood up, the room started spinning, and she felt really light-headed. She stumbled a little bit, but she somehow managed to steady herself at the table. Her next step would prove to be her downfall. As her foot went up, everything else started a downward descent.

She landed on the floor, flat on her ass.

Everyone ran over to her to see if she was hurt or not. But she was fine. In fact she was laughing her ass off.

“Who moved my chair?” she asked in between her laughing.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Michael asked her.

“Oh, I’m fine. I just lost my footing, is all. Help me up, dear,” she told him.

Mike and Grady helped Katie back into her chair. Katie was drunk. After just three drinks, she was toasted on both sides.

“Wow, that’s some wicked stuff. Pour me another one,” she told her father.

“No, dear. I’m quite sure that you’ve had plenty already,” he told her.

“Hey, you guys started this. I told you that I only wanted the one drink. Did you listen to me? Nope, you just kept them coming. Well, now I want another, and you have the nerve to tell me that I can’t have anymore. That’s not fair. I’m telling you that I’m fine, really,” she said as she laid her arms out across the table. Her head soon found its way across her arms.

Her head was still spinning even though she was still sitting down.

“Grady, could I have another one? But only half full please?” Melissa asked.

“Sure, dear,” he answered as he refilled her glass along with Paul’s, Mike’s, and Rick’s.

“Oh, that isn’t fair. How come she gets another one, and I don’t?” Katie asked.

“All right, Katie, if you really want to get rip-roaring drunk and sick, then you can pour your own poison. But hear this, you can’t say that I didn’t warn you,” he told her.

“Grady, don’t let her do it. You know what’s going to happen to her,” Mary told him.

“Yes, I do. She’ll learn the same lesson as everyone else has. She will more than likely get sick and throw up all over the place. And in the morning, her head is going to feel like it’s about to explode. But she’ll have no one to blame but herself,” Grady told her.

“Why don’t you all . . . reax . . . I mean relax. I’m fin . . . fine,” she told them as she poured herself another full glass and downed it just like she had the others.

Nobody kept count just how much those two ladies had to drink between the two of them, but before their journey was over, the entire fifth of whiskey was gone plus a half of another one.

The next morning, Mary walked into Katie’s bedroom. *Oh, this should be interesting if nothing else*, she quietly thought to herself as she walked up to Katie’s bed. Katie was half dressed, half covered up with a blanket,

and just about ready to fall out of the bed. Mary didn't want that to happen, not that Katie might hurt herself even though that was a concern of hers. No, she knew from experiences of her own what Katie's head was going to feel like. And falling to the floor surely wouldn't help. Not at all. So Mary positioned herself right next to her so she couldn't fall from the bed.

Mary pulled on the blanket.

"Good morning, sunshine! Time to get up," Mary told her.

Katie just rolled the opposite direction as she tried to reclaim her blanket.

"Come on, you have your rehearsal today. Come on, get up," she told her as she pulled the remaining blanket from Katie's grip.

"Go away, it's too damn early," Katie mumbled.

"Nope, I ain't leaving until you're up and walking around, so let's go," Mary answered.

"Go away before I have to hurt you," Katie replied.

"So how's your head feel this morning?" Mary asked.

"My head is just fine, but it's that damn banging in between my ears that's killing me," Katie answered.

"So did you learn your lesson last night?" Mary asked as she pulled the pillow out from under Katie's head.

"Oh yeah, whiskey is not my friend," she answered.

"Well, just wait 'cause now the worse part comes. And if I might add a few suggestions for your next drinking binge?" she asked.

"The worse part? I thought I did that last night in the toilet," Katie replied.

"Oh, so you did get sick. That's good, but there's two things that are worse than getting sick," Mary told her.

"How could anything be worse than throwing up your guts?" Katie asked.

“You’ll see. Just remember you did this to yourself, sweetheart. Now you have to face your audience,” Mary told her as she pulled Katie by one leg.

“My audience? What are you talking about. I drank, then I got sick, and went to bed,” Katie told her.

“You only remember it that way. But what you don’t remember is what all happened or was said in between, the drinking and the getting sick part,” Mary replied.

“Why what did I do that was so bad?” she asked as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“Well, let’s see. Something about you and Mike in the barn, something or another about a loop skirt. Does that refresh your memory?” Mary asked.

Katie sat up in bed. “Tell me that I didn’t tell everyone about that,” Katie asked her.

“Tell everyone? Oh yeah, in great detail, I might add. Hell, had we let you, you wanted to show all of us how Michael had his head up your skirt,” Mary told her.

“You’re kidding. I told everyone. Oh God, how bad was it?” Katie asked.

“Pretty bad. Come on, get up and get in the shower. It will help,” Mary told her.

“What else did I say?” Katie asked her.

“Well, you pretty much spilled your guts about everything, and I do mean everything. But the worst part would be the . . . oh, I can’t tell ya,” Mary told her.

“Can’t tell me what? What did I say that was so bad?” she asked.

“It’s not exactly what you said, it’s more about what you did,” Mary finally confessed to her.

“Oh God, what did I do? You have to tell me Please,” Katie pleaded with her.

Mary reached into the pocket of her robe and pulled them out and tossed them to Katie. Katie caught them in her hand. And she knew exactly what they were.

“My underwear? But how did you get my underwear? Oh, I didn’t, did I?” Katie asked her.

“Yeah, ya did, dear. You got up on the dining room table, and you and Melissa started doing a striptease show for Mike and Rick. And if Paul and your daddy hadn’t stopped the two of you, you would have been naked in no time,” Mary told her.

“Well, thank God they stopped us. But a striptease show isn’t all that bad, or was it?” Katie asked.

“Well, not really, but as you were doing it, you were kind of bragging about what you and Melissa were going to be doing on Saturday night to your new husbands, if you know what I mean?” she told her.

“Oh my dear Lord! Please tell me that we didn’t get into a lot of details, please,” Katie asked her.

“Well, all I can say is this. You two would have made a sailor blush, okay? And we’ll leave it at that,” Mary told her.

“You’re kidding, right? That doesn’t sound like something that I would talk about. Well maybe, but not in detail,” she told her.

“Well, that is the beauty of alcohol. Drink enough of the stuff, and you really loosen up. And that’s exactly what you did. And once you got started, Melissa tried to outdo you,” Mary told her.

“Well, what exactly did I say?” she asked.

“Well, I’m not going to repeat everything that you said word for word, but some of the highlights that come to mind would be like riding the log ride and the tunnel shot. Whatever that is? I have a pretty good guesses, but I don’t need an explanation either,” Mary told her.

“Oh my god! How embarrassing!” Katie said as she swung her legs off of the bed and started to stand up. The pounding in her head intensified, and

she lost her balance, falling back onto her bed. “Whoa! What was that?” Katie asked.

“That, my dear, is the alcohol that’s still in your bloodstream. You might feel it for the better part of the day, considering how much you drank last night,” Mary answered.

“You have to be joking? And what’s with this pounding in my head? Does it ever go away?” Katie asked.

“Oh yeah, it will go away in time. I tried to warn you last night, but like your dad said, you had to learn it on your own. And I guess you have, haven’t you?” she asked.

“Oh yeah. I’ve learned my lesson all right. Class dismissed” she said as she put her head in her hands and listened to the pounding in her head.

“What you need now is a nice shower, some clean clothes, and coffee,” Mary told her.

“Right now, I’d rather just go back to sleep. But I can tell that you ain’t going to let that happen, are you?” she asked.

“Not a chance. Sorry, dear. Your rehearsal is only a few hours away, so get up and get in the shower. I’ll go get you some coffee,” Mary told her.

“Okay, but can I ask you an honest question first?” Katie asked her.

“Sure, honey, what’s is it?” Mary asked as she stood in front of her.

“You and Paul . . . you don’t . . . well, you don’t think less of me, do you? I mean . . . I really acted pretty childish last night and all,” Katie asked.

Mary just looked at her. “Honey, not at all. Everyone goes through that phase in their life. I did, Paul did, and I know that your dad certainly did. We might kid you about it for a while, but that too will pass. So there’s no reason to worry about it,” Mary told her.

“Well, that’s good. I mean I’ve really come to love the both of you, and the titles of aunt and uncle aren’t just given names. I really consider you as an aunt, and it would really bother me if I thought you thought less of me,” Katie told her.

“Well, I’m glad to be your aunt. And you would really have to do something really mean for me to look at you any differently. And being mean, well, it’s just not in your character, so that will never happen,” she explained.

“Well, that certainly makes me feel better,” Katie said as she slowly stood up and gave Mary a hug. Mary returned the hug.

“Don’t you go getting yourself all worked up over nothing, okay? But you really do need to go and get in that shower and start getting ready. I’ll fetch you some coffee,” Mary told her.

“Yeah, a shower. Now, that really sounds good. Hey, so who won?” Katie asked.

“Who won what? Oh, you’re talking about last night, aren’t you? Let me think a minute . . . I think it would be a very close tie. Both of you totally embarrassed yourselves. But we’ll have to see how Melissa does this morning,” she replied.

“So did she make it home last night or what?” Katie asked.

“Did she make it home? Honey, she barely made it to the couch. In fact, I need to go wake her up too. So don’t use up all the hot water ’cause she’ll be right behind ya. Okay?” Mary asked her.

“I won’t,” Katie told her as she slowly started to make her way into the shower. Mary was just about at the door when Katie stopped her.

“Mary?” she asked.

Mary stopped and turned to face her. “Yes?” she responded.

“I just wanted to say thanks. Thanks for everything that you’ve done for us. I really appreciate it. I mean it too,” she told her.

“Forget it, there’s no need to thank me. That’s what a good aunt does, isn’t it? And besides, this is kind of fun. I mean helping you all with your wedding and all. So the pleasure is all mine,” Mary said as she opened the door and left, closing the door behind her.

Katie slowly eased her body beneath the cascading water. Mary was right—it did feel good, and she felt a lot better.

Melissa, on the other hand, wasn't doing as well. While Katie had a drum beating in her head, Melissa had the entire marching band in hers. She sat there on the couch with her elbows resting on her knees and her face buried in her hands.

"Oh, good, you're awake," Mary told her as she entered the living room. Melissa just looked up at her and didn't say a thing before she reburied her face in her hands.

"So how are feeling this morning?" Mary asked her.

"Terrible, simply terrible. Thanks for asking. What time is it?" she asked.

"A little past eight. So how's your head feeling?" she asked.

"I don't know. I've seemed to have lost it. God, what a night. Never again. Oh God, please stop me next time. Please," she said as she looked up at Mary as she stood before her.

"I tried to warn you two. But you just wouldn't listen," Mary told her.

Melissa was just about to respond when she noticed something behind Mary that caught her attention.

"What is that? Hanging from the chandelier?" she asked.

Mary turned and looked up at the chandelier.

"Oh, those. What do you think that is?" Mary asked.

"Well, if I didn't know better, I would say that it looks a lot like my underwear, but—" Melissa stopped herself as her eyes grew wide.

"But what?" Mary asked her.

"Oh my! Those are mine, aren't they?" she asked.

"Yep, they sure are. Right where you left them," Mary told her.

"Tell me, do I really want to know how my underwear ended up hanging from Grady's chandelier?" she asked.

"Probably not. But let's just say that between you and Katie, you both were really high-spirited last night," she answered.

“The last thing I remember was when Katie was trying to show you all how Mike had his head up her skirt that day in the barn. Everything after that is a total blur. But my underwear hanging up there only tells me one thing. It got worse, didn’t it?” Melissa asked.

“If I had to pick just one word to describe the two of you last night, the word *worse* would be an understatement at best,” Mary answered.

“That bad? My head tells me the same thing. So where is everyone?” she asked.

“Well, Katie is in the shower. Paul and Grady are outside helping to build a dance floor or doing something with a public address system, and Rick and Mike are at home, I think. As for Elizabeth and little Katie, I haven’t seen them, so I take it that they’re still in bed,” she answered.

“Question. And I thought about this last night, but if the groom isn’t supposed to see the bride on the day before their wedding, how are we going to do a rehearsal?” she asked.

“I thought about that too. I’m not quite sure, but I think that Grady and Paul have that all worked out. We’ll see,” Mary told her.

“Speaking of Rick, did I say anything that really embarrassed him last night?” she asked.

“Well, besides the striptease that the two of you decided to do on the dining room table and you both giving a very vivid description of your honeymoon activities that you have planned, I would have to say no,” Mary answered.

“Excuse me! What striptease? And how vivid was my description about the honeymoon stuff?” she asked as her eyes opened wide, and she looked up at Mary.

Mary told her about the striptease and how Paul and Grady had to stop the two of them. “But as far as your description into your so-called honeymoon antics, well, it was like we were there. You’re very good with words, dear,” Mary confessed to her.

“Oh my God! How embarrassing!” Melissa said.

“That’s funny. That’s the very same response that I got from Katie when I told her. Are you sure you two aren’t real sisters?” she asked.

“Would you call the train depot? I need a ticket on the next train leaving town,” Melissa told her.

“Relax, it’s not that bad, but I will get you a cup of coffee, or would you prefer some more whiskey?” she asked.

“Oh no, you keep that stuff away from me, but I will take the coffee. That sounds good. Maybe I’ll go to California or maybe even Canada. I hear the weather up there is nice this time of year,” Melissa said as she put her face back in her hands.

“You’re not going anywhere. Besides, Rick would just follow you anyways. So ya might as well save your money and face the music here and get it over with. And look at it this way, dear, technically the next time that you’ll see Rick, you’ll be his wife. Or shortly thereafter anyways. And I really don’t think he’s going to stop the wedding ceremony just to talk to you about your whiskey exploits,” Mary told her.

“Yeah, you’re right. Maybe he just won’t show up on Saturday,” Melissa said jokingly.

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen. You really need to have more faith in your heart,” Mary told her.

“I’m just kidding. So was he mad or what when we did the bit about the honeymoon?” she asked.

“Well, if anything, I’d say that he was excited more than anything else,” Mary told her.

“Really? How excited?” she asked.

“Well, I guess you’ll just have to wait until Saturday to find that out for yourself,” Mary answered.

“Yeah, Saturday. That’s only tomorrow. Oh, this is going to be great!” Melissa said with a huge smile on her face.

“I’ll go get the coffee. Katie should almost be done in the shower by now. Remember, you’re next in the shower,” Mary said as she headed for

the kitchen.

“Yeah, in the shower. That would work too!” Melissa said to herself with a much bigger grin on her face if that was even possible.

Katie was downstairs sitting at the dining room table drinking her third cup of coffee when her cousin walked into the room.

“Well, good morning, coz. Boy, don’t you look all pretty this morning?” Katie said as her little cousin sat down next to her with a bowl of cereal before her.

“Good morning to you too. I want to watch you do your wedding stuff today,” she replied.

Katie just looked at her. She guessed that nobody had told her that she was in the wedding too.

“Are you sure that you want to watch? Wouldn’t you prefer to be in the wedding?” Katie asked her.

“I know that I get to be in your wedding. I’m the flower girl. That’s why they measured me the other day,” she responded.

“Who measured you and for what?” she asked.

“Ooopppsss! I wasn’t supposed to tell you. It’s a surprise. Please don’t tell anyone that I told you. Please, it would ruin the surprise,” little Katie asked her.

“Well, okay, I guess. Gee, there are a lot of secrets going around this place,” Katie responded.

“Can I ask you a question, woman to woman?” the little girl asked as she stared up at her bigger cousin.

“Woman to woman, you say?” Katie asked.

“How about cousin to cousin since I’m not quite a woman yet?” the little girl asked her.

“Fine, cousin to cousin. What’s your question?” Katie asked.

“Well, last night, you all were pretty noisy and all, and well, I couldn’t sleep. So I just lay there listening to all of you talking, and I have a question about something that you said last night,” little Katie asked.

Katie started wondering just how much of which part of last night had she heard. It certainly was more than she should have heard. Especially since she felt that she needed to ask questions about it. *Oh, God, this could be real interesting. I could use a little help down here right about now*, she prayed to herself.

“Okay, what’s your question?” she asked as she took a big gulp of coffee, not really wanting to know what her little cousin had heard.

“What’s a hoop skirt? And why did he have his head up your skirt? Was he looking for something?” she asked.

The question caught Katie totally off guard. That big gulp of coffee came spraying out of her mouth. She was in total shock. Apparently, little Katie had heard far too much of the conversation last night.

Katie slammed the coffee cup down on the table and stood up with her open hand covering her mouth.

“Did I say something wrong?” little Katie asked.

It took a few moments before Katie could recapture her composure and answer her cousin’s question. She grabbed a towel and started wiping up the coffee.

“No, of course not, I just wasn’t expecting you to ask that question, that’s all,” Katie finally answered.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you spit your coffee all over the place,” little Katie told her.

“It’s all right. But ladies don’t spit. It was more like a spray,” she said as she started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” the little girl asked.

“Nothing. I just got this imagine of me spitting my coffee all over the place. That’s all,” she told her cousin.

“But you just said that ladies don’t spit—they spray,” she answered back.

“I know. That’s what’s so funny. You saw it right? What I just did was definitely a spit, wasn’t it?” she asked.

“That’s what I would call it. But how does a woman spray? Can you show me how to spray?” she asked.

“A woman don’t spray, honey, but it isn’t proper for a woman to spit either, so I don’t know what you would call it. But what I just did with my coffee, that was a spit,” Katie told her.

“You’ve got me all confused. You spit your coffee out, then you called it a spray. Now you’re calling it a spit again. So which one was it?” little Katie asked her.

Katie made a quick scan of the dining room.

“Katie, did your uncle send you in here to get back at me for last night?” she asked.

“No, why would he do that?” she asked.

“Just because he’s Uncle Grady, that’s why,” Katie answered.

“Are you okay? You’re acting really weird. Should I go get my mom?” she asked.

“No, I’m fine really. But enough with the spray and spit stuff okay? Just forget that I said it. Now about your question regarding the hoop skirt—”

Melissa walked into the room.

“Katie, are you telling your hoop skirt story to your cousin? Boy, you did have too much to drink last night, didn’t ya?” Melissa told her.

“No. I mean, yes. No, I mean. Okay, yes, I had too much to drink last night, and no, I’m not telling the hoop skirt story to my cousin. But she heard us talking last night, and she asked me what a hoop skirt was among other things. So I was explaining it to her,” Katie told her.

“Okay, I guess. Good morning, Katie,” Melissa said as she rubbed the top of the little girl’s head as she walked by. Melissa soon returned with a

cup of coffee and sat down and took a big gulp of the hot beverage.

“Melissa, can you show me how to spray like Katie does?” little Katie asked her. Melissa lost her coffee the same way that Katie had. Katie just handed her the towel.

“Can I what?” Melissa asked as she started to wipe up the coffee.

“Never mind, you just did,” little Katie told her.

“Wait a second. What did I just do?” Melissa asked her.

“You showed me how to spray. A woman don’t spit—they spray. That’s what Katie said,” the little girl told her.

“We don’t spit? We spray? What are you talking about?” Melissa asked again.

Katie jumped in and tried to explain to her everything that was said and everything. “So when my little cousin here said that she was sorry for making me spit my coffee out, just like you just did, I told her that it isn’t proper for a woman to spit. And that’s how the spray concept came in,” Katie told her. Melissa was laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Katie asked.

“Was he looking for something? If she only knew the truth?” Melissa answered.

“You’re right. I didn’t think about it before, but you’re right. That is funny,” Katie answered.

“What didn’t you think about before?” Mary asked as she walked into the dining room followed by her brother and Grady.

“Oh, nothing, just talking,” Melissa answered.

“So how are my two whiskey-gulping party animals this morning?” Grady asked them.

“My head feels like it’s about ready to explode, but the shower really helped,” Melissa added.

“What about you, Katie? How are you doing?” he asked.

“Let’s just say that I’ve had much better days and leave it at that,” she responded.

Elizabeth walked into the room. “Grady, why is there a pair of women’s underwear hanging from your chandelier?” she asked as she sat down at the table.

“There is? Is there still a woman wearing them, I hope?” he answered.

“Nope, sorry. They’re empty, but whose are they and how did they get there?” Elizabeth asked again.

“Melissa, would you care to answer her question?” Grady asked her. Everyone turned to look at her as they waited for a response.

“Okay, they’re mine, but I haven’t the slightest clue on how they got there. Okay?” she said.

“Oh, that’s right. You two got drunk last night. I’ve been there before too, I seem to recall. So I don’t see a need for you to explain anything any further,” Elizabeth answered.

Katie turned to her father. “Daddy what in the world is going on outside?” she asked him. “It sounds like there’s a bunch of people out there making a bunch of noise.”

“Well honestly, there’s about a hundred or so of the townspeople out there building you all a dance floor and rigging up a public address system. Among other things. It’s actually quite impressive to say the least,” Grady answered her.

# Everything that They Caused

“How many people did you say were out there?” Melissa asked.

“Oh, I don’t know how many are actually out there,” he answered, “but I would venture to guess just about a hundred. Wouldn’t you say that was a pretty close guess, Paul?”

“Yeah a hundred, give or take a few either way. I would say that would be about right,” Paul answered.

“At eight-thirty in the morning?” Melissa responded.

“Eight-thirty? Hell, they were here at five-thirty. Not all people can afford to sleep in until eight. People do have things to do other than sleeping, that is,” he responded.

“Katie dear, I really think your daddy is referring to the two of us,” Melissa told her.

“Yeah, I got that impression too. So what do you say we sit here and drink another cup of coffee and then go outside and see what they’re doing out there?” Katie answered.

“That sounds like a plan. But it might be more like two or three cups of coffee and then go outside,” Melissa replied.

Katie and Melissa finished their coffee and stepped out into the bright Georgia sun. The brightness of the sun as it bared down on them made their eyes water. As their eyes slowly became adjusted to the light, what they saw before them was breathtaking. The mere fact that it was all being done wasn’t the shocking part. What made all of this so meaningful, so spectacular, was the fact that it was all being done for them by the people of the town, many of them they had never even seen before let alone talked to. But there they were, building a large dance floor and running wires from tree to tree for not only a public address system, but for a lighting system as well. And they were all pounding, cutting, setting things up. Why? Because they wanted to. With every pounding of a hammer, every banging of a piece of wood, the throbbing within the girls’ heads was increasing, but they

didn't say anything to anyone about it 'cause what all of these people were doing was far more important than their own personal miseries that they had brought on to themselves. God, how they both hated whiskey right now.

Katie stepped off of the porch. There were people everywhere, each going about their business as if it was their job. Melissa stepped down off of the porch and walked up next to Katie and threw her arm around her shoulder.

"And you said that you didn't have any friends," Melissa said as she pulled Katie a little closer.

"Yeah, I did, but this is just too much. What we did, I mean with the gold and all, was it really that important to these people? Look at them working their butts off just for us," Katie said as she took a few more steps forward.

"Well, apparently it was to them anyways," Melissa answered.

One of the guys that were doing the lighting looked over and saw the two ladies looking around. He nudged the guys on both sides of him who in turn nudged the next two. And before long, every worker stopped what they were doing and was staring at Katie and Melissa.

"What are they looking at?" Katie asked Melissa.

"I'm not sure, but I think they're looking at us, but don't ask me why," Melissa answered.

Then one of the guys started clapping his hands and then another, then all of them were clapping and whistling.

"Why in the world are they clapping for?" Katie asked.

From behind them a voice answered. "They're clapping for you two," he answered.

The two ladies turned to see a very familiar face before them. It was their reporter friend from the *Charleston Herald*, Robert Kincaid.

"Well, hello there, you're Robert Kincaid, right? It's been a while, but I'm pretty good at remembering names," Katie responded.

“Yes, you are very good at names, or so it would seem,” he answered.

“So what do you mean they’re clapping for us? Why would they do that?” she asked.

Melissa didn’t say anything. She just waited with Katie for a response from their reporter friend.

“Because you’re heroes. At least that’s how they see you,” he answered.

Melissa looked at Katie. “Heroes? For what? We didn’t do anything. Well, we did but nothing that would warrant this type of attention, really?” she told him.

“Oh, you did a lot more than you’ll ever know. Trust me,” he told them.

“What do you mean?” Katie asked.

“Well, it’s like this. I talked to my editor several times over the past week or so. Ever since we carried that very first story about your great-grandfather, remember? Anyways, ever since that first story broke, our readers just can’t seem to get enough about you and Melissa here and the rest of your little group,” he told them.

“What stuff? What are you talking about?” Katie asked.

“Well it seems that ever since the story broke about your discovery, there’s been a rush on the Mattersonville library for books on American history. And when they ran out, they had to open the high school library. Now what do you think happened when about five hundred people all wanted to check out every book in the library that deals with American history. Of course, they soon ran out of books as you might have guessed. So those that didn’t get a chance at a book started forming discussion groups, and then two groups formed a class. Now all of a sudden, and for the very first time I might add, Mattersonville High School is holding classes in the summer. It’s like nobody can get enough of this American history stuff. And you guys all started it. And there isn’t a girl within fifty miles that doesn’t want to be just like the two of you,” he told them.

“You’re kidding? That’s great! I mean, that they’re taking an interest in the history of this great country. But really we didn’t start it,” Katie told

him.

“Wait, I’m not done yet. It isn’t just happening here in this town. It’s happening in every town in every state that carried your story. Libraries all over the place are being swamped with request for more history books. And if you didn’t know, sixty percent of the schoolbooks in this country are printed right here in Georgia, which means more jobs and more books,” he told the two ladies before him.

“No way! All because of the treasure that we recovered?” Melissa asked.

“It doesn’t stop at the libraries. Beauty salons are getting requests for Katie and Melissa hairdos. The girls want to walk like you and talk like you. And it’s not just the girls either. Your brother played football, didn’t he, Melissa?” he asked.

“Well in high school, he did. So?” she responded.

“You might be surprised to learn that they now have enough kids that want to play football this year. That they might have to have three teams just so everyone can play,” he told them.

“You’re kidding?” Melissa responded.

“And we haven’t even touched the music department whose having a run on banjos and request for lessons,” he told them.

“So everything that we’ve done, they want to do?” Katie asked.

“To be blunt, Ms. Windslow, yes. I have an eight-year-old daughter that worships you. And just the other day, she came home with a banjo. So now we’re doing lessons too,” he responded.

“That’s unbelievable. I mean it’s great too, but I never thought that all of this could happen just because we discovered the treasure. And this is why they’re all doing this?” Katie asked.

“Ms Windslow, you all didn’t just discover the lost gold of the Confederacy in this town. No, you woke the people of this town up. You woke the people of America up. Everyone has this urge to look into their past. And I know that since you’re getting married on Saturday, so you

probably won't be at church on Sunday, but it wouldn't surprise me to find out that there's an overflow of people at church this Sunday. Just because of you and your faith in God," he told her.

"Well, that's a good thing. God always has room for more souls. Maybe they should take all of this wood and build a bigger church," she kindly told him.

"Well, maybe they will at that. But for now, it's being used for a better reason. Your wedding," he answered.

"Well, while I appreciate the comment, I'm not too sure which one is more important, us or God," she answered.

"Well, I'm pretty sure that even God wouldn't mind taking the backseat for just one day. After all, you are Katie Windslow," he answered back.

Katie turned and looked at the workers who had all returned to their duties.

"Well, even so. I think all of these guys are the heroes. Certainly not us. And as far as everything that is happening just because of a simple little story in a newspaper, well, I think it's great. But we really don't need to be praised just for following a map. Anyone could have done that," she answered.

"Yeah, but here's the deal, Ms. Windslow. They didn't. You did. And we're not talking about just one article in the paper either. According to my editor, our readers want more. More stories about you, Melissa, and everyone else in your little group. So it would seem that the *Charleston Herald* has done maybe ten or more stories about you. And there's more to come. We'll be here tomorrow, and your wedding will be in all of the papers as well," he told the two shocked women that stood before him.

"How many articles? What in the world could they have possibly found to write that many stories on us about?" Katie asked.

"Gee, let's see. There's you at church two or three times, the treasure, your wedding, and basically your life in general," he answered.

“My life in general? Trust me, my life story would not make for very good reading. I was there, so I should know. But still, I guess I should be flattered to some degree, I suppose,” Katie responded.

“Well, I can tell you this. Every aspect of your life from the day that you were born up to and including the fire that took your mother’s life has made the national news,” he told her.

“You wrote a story about my mother and how she died in that fire?” Katie asked him.

“Yes, we did, but let me assure you that it was done in a very respectful format. But it wasn’t just about the fire and you losing your mother. It was the connection between your family and the Klan that sparked the interest. And I know that you’ve been busy and all, you know with your wedding and everything else, but I do have copies of every article that we’ve done on you,” he told her.

“Really? I’d like to see those. But I thought that you were just going to do articles on the treasure. I didn’t think that you would dig into my past like that. My life is my life, and while I’m sure that you meant no harm, I still feel a little violated,” Katie responded.

“Trust me, we didn’t go digging for dirt of your life. But here’s a little girl living her own quiet life in Mobile, Alabama, and then there’s this tragic fire that not only destroys your home, but takes the life of your mother in the process. That alone is a story that’s worth writing. But what we wrote about was what happened after the fire,” he told her.

“After the fire? What happened after the fire that you found so interesting to write about?” Katie asked him.

“You and your never-ending faith in God. Most people having gone through something as tragic as what you went through would have at least questioned their faith in God. But not you. From what we’ve gathered, your faith in God just blossomed. And that, my dear Katie, is what our readers read about. You’re a very extraordinary young lady. And to say that our readers are in love with you as a person, well, that wouldn’t be an understatement at all,” he told her.

“I see, but I still do wish that you would have at least checked with me first, but I guess what is done is done. But promise me that you’ll do no more stories about my past or that of my father’s without clearing it with us first. Okay?” she asked.

“That’s a promise that I intend to keep. But I do need to ask you some questions regarding a certain court case that you’ve refused to pursue. It just doesn’t make sense you dropping the charges like you did,” he told her.

“Well, that won’t happen. That story is one that you can’t write about. I’m sorry,” she told him.

“I understand that you might not want everyone to know the details behind that story. But again, it’s what happened afterwards that we want to write about. You have this uncanny knack for—”

“Turning turds into diamonds,” Melissa added.

Mr. Kincaid just stopped and looked at Melissa.

“Exactly. I’m not sure that I would have used those exact words, but, yes, that’s it in a nutshell. I know about the four guys in that cave that night, and I know that you refused to press charges against them for whatever reason you had. But I also know that guys have turned their lives around just because you gave them a break. And that, my dear lady, is what sells papers. And like I said before, you just keep racking up points with our readers. And they just can’t get enough of the Katie Windslow story,” he told her.

“The Katie Windslow story? But what about Melissa and my dad? there has to be some mention about Mike and Rick too, but to call it the Katie Windslow story might not be very fair to everyone else that’s a part of my life,” she told him.

“Maybe not, but here’s the beauty of all of this. You’re the focal point of this story. Everything and everyone associated with you is all part of the general story, you see. Just like Melissa’s job offer, that too is connected right back to you,” he explained.

“You know about my job offer?” Melissa asked.

“Of course I do. I’m a reporter and a very good one, I might add. And we’ll be doing a featured story on you and Rick and your plans for the future too. But that can’t happen until after the wedding. That is if you don’t mind,” he told her.

“A story about me and Rick and our plans for the future? That should be interesting to say the least,” Melissa responded.

“Excuse me for asking, but just how do you go about finding these little tidbits of information to begin with?” Katie asked him.

“Well, I’m sorry to say that I can’t say. I have my sources. But just because I hear about something, it doesn’t mean that I’ll write about them. There has to be a gap between your personal life and what appears in our paper,” he told the two girls.

“Well, that’s a good thing, but if I let you write this story that you asked about, because it is a very strong story about people turning their lives around and all, you’ll have to promise me that you will not use any of their real names unless you get their permission first. These people are my friends, and they deserve to have their names withheld if they so choose. Is that a fair compromise?” Katie asked him.

“That’s a very fair compromise. One that I would honor without hesitation,” he answered.

“And another thing, you have to give me your word as a person, not as a reporter, that you will not do any stories that refers or even mentions the death of my Uncle Jack or the person responsible. Is that understood?” Katie asked.

“Without question. I know that you must have your own personal reasons, and I will honor that request,” he told her.

“That’s good enough for me, but you’ll have to wait for my head to quit throbbing first. It would seem that I had a first and last encounter with some whiskey last night, so it might prove to be very beneficial for us to wait a while before we sit down and talk about all of this. And do us a favor, please refrain from telling everyone about the whiskey, okay?” Katie asked him.

“Fair enough. I’ll leave the whiskey part out of any story along with the mystery of the underwear hanging from the chandelier as well,” he answered.

“You know about my underwear hanging from the chandelier too?” Melissa asked.

“Well, I just heard rumors, but up until now, I had no idea as to whose they were, but of course now, I know that they’re yours,” he answered.

“Oh that was slick, but I’d like to know who told ya about them in the first place,” Melissa told him.

“Sorry, can’t tell ya, but I won’t write about your undies hanging from the chandelier anyways. That’s a bit too personal. I mean, that goes into the same category as, say, a hoop skirt story might fall into,” he answered.

“You know about the hoop skirt story too? Okay, someone around here has a really big mouth,” Katie responded.

“Well, all that I can tell you is this. It was all done with the very best intentions, that’s for sure. But I asked for their help in doing the stories, and they agreed to help me to convey your stories in the best way possible, direct from the source so to speak,” he told them.

“Direct from the source, you say? You’ve been talking to my daddy, haven’t you?” Katie responded.

“Well, I won’t confirm or deny my source’s name, but I’m sure that you’ll put two and two together and come up with your own conclusions,” he told her.

“But what you’re saying is ever since your paper broke that first story about her great-grandfather, people have become somewhat fascinated with all of us? So much in fact that they want to be us, or at the very least they want to act like us?” Melissa asked.

“Well, yeah, I guess, but I think it goes more along the line of following in your footsteps. Look, right now you’re like an idol to a lot of people. And that gives you an opportunity to steer a lot of people down the right path. Just like Katie apparently did with those guys in the cave. So the

choice is yours, but I'd advise you to take this opportunity to make a difference," he told them.

"I see, but if everyone is following us now, what could we possibly do better? It seems to me we should just be ourselves 'cause that's what they like about us. Right?" Katie asked.

"That's exactly my point. Whatever you do, just be yourself as you're doing it. It might prove to be that simple indeed," he told them.

"And you'll keep writing stories about us, is that it?" Melissa asked.

"No, I'll keep writing some really great stories about you all," he replied.

"And if something should happen that might not show, let's say, our best side, you wouldn't write about it? Is that what you're saying?" Katie asked.

"Well, let's just say that I'll write it in a way that you keep your dignity and respect intact. Is that a fair trade?" he asked them both.

"Sounds like a winner to me. What do you think, Mel?" Katie asked.

"I think it's something that we might be willing to give a chance," she replied.

"Good, then that's settled. Now tell me about the underwear hanging from the chandelier," he asked.

"Don't even think about it. That story is off-limits," Melissa said with a smile.

About that time, Grady and Paul walked up to them. Katie just threw her daddy a weird look.

"What was that look for?" he asked.

"We'll talk later, so are we ready to start the rehearsal yet?" she asked.

"No, not yet but soon. Everyone should start getting here pretty soon," he answered.

“Well, I need to know the minute that Bobby gets here. I want to introduce him to Katie. I have to see the look on his face,” she told her daddy.

“Grady, can I ask a question?” Melissa asked.

“Sure, dear, what’s your question?” he asked.

“Well if a groom isn’t supposed to see the bride the day before the wedding, then how do we do a rehearsal?” she asked.

“Well, I see what you’re getting at, but I think you’re wrong. A bride and groom can see each other, but he can’t see you in your wedding gown. And some people will also tell you that you can see each other the night before either. But we’ll just go for the wedding dress restriction and let it go at that. Of course, you two can’t see each other the night before either. Especially if there’s a bottle of whiskey anywhere within reach of you two,” he told her.

“Very funny. But I do believe that the affair with your whiskey friend is all finished. Once was enough. At least, it is for me,” Melissa answered.

“Yeah right, I mean sure, if that’s what you want me to believe,” he told her.

“Well, you should know me by now. I don’t lie. You can ask my mom,” she said with a smile.

“I just might do that, but since you brought the subject of your mother up, what time will your parents be here tomorrow? Your mom has expressed an interest in getting you ready,” he told her.

“I’m sure that it will be early. Maybe before the sun comes up if I know her,” she answered.

“Well, I’ll be sure to get up early then. A lot earlier than either of you two, I’ll bet ya,” he told her.

“Daddy, do you really think either of us will be getting any sleep tonight? I mean the day before the biggest day of our lives, you have to be dreamin’,” Katie told her daddy.

“Yeah, we’ll see who gets up first,” Grady said as he stared at his daughter.

“Yeah, I guess we will at that,” she said as she turned to see a car pulling into the driveway. It was Cindy, Bobby, and their brother Ricky. Their father was driving. He pulled their station wagon right up to where they were standing. As their father got out of the car, he just stared at the giant structure before him.

“Wow, this is very impressive. I never expected anything like this,” he told Grady as the two gentlemen shook hands.

“Trust me, neither did we,” Grady responded.

Bobby and Cindy ran up to Katie.

“Good morning, Ms. Windslow,” the two children told her in unison.

“Well, good morning right back to the two of you. You both look very nice today. And for today, please call me Katie. Okay?” she asked them.

“Okay,” Cindy said as she started looking around at all of the men working and the huge white stage with all of its flowers. “Wow, is all of this just for your wedding?” she asked.

“Sure is, so what do you think? Pretty impressive, isn’t it?” Katie asked her.

“Oh my, yes, it’s beautiful,” she responded.

# Bobby Meets His Dream Girl

Katie looked over at Bobby. "Good morning, Bobby, how are you today?" she asked him.

"A lot better now," he replied.

"Why now? What made you feel better?" she asked.

"I always feel better when I see you, Ms. Windslow," he answered.

"Bobby, you're so sweet. But I have someone really special for you to meet. But you have to promise that you'll act like a gentleman, okay? Just like you did when we danced up on that stage. Do you remember?" she asked him.

"A man never forgets the dance of a lifetime," he told her.

"Now, Bobby, you know that I'm getting married tomorrow, and well, we can only be friends, right?" she asked him.

"I know . . . but you can still change your mind?" he responded.

"Well, that won't be happening. But I'm flattered that such a handsome man such as yourself is smitten on me. I'm honored, but come with me so I can introduce you to someone that's more your age," she told him.

"Doesn't matter because it still won't be you. And you're the woman of my dreams," he told her.

"Well, we'll see about that. But you have to promise to be a perfect gentleman, okay?" she asked him again.

"Okay, I promise. I'll be a gentleman," he told her.

Bobby walked next to Katie as she led him toward the house. And even though Katie was holding his hand, his stare was fixed on the ground. Katie felt as if she was leading a poor defenseless animal to slaughter even though she knew better. Little Katie met them on the front porch.

"Bobby, I'd like you to meet my cousin Katie," Katie told him.

Bobby never looked up at the pretty blonde girl before him. He just said hi in a very low tone.

“Bobby, this is my cousin . . . Katie, Katie Windslow,” she told him again.

Bobby slowly lifted his head. And from the very first sight of this miniature version of his dream girl, his eyes grew wide, and a smile grew across his face that stretched from ear to ear. He stared at her without saying anything, then he glanced up at Katie and then back at the ten-year-old version of her.

“You two could be twins,” he said with a great big smile.

“Well, are you going to say hi at least?” Katie asked him.

He just looked at her. “Hello, Katie, my name is Bobby. And I’m honored to meet you,” he told her.

“Well, hi, Bobby, it’s a pleasure to meet you too,” little Katie responded to him.

Bobby was speechless. Words just couldn’t express what was going through that young man’s heart. Even though he was only ten years old, he knew that he had found his dream girl. He just stood there speechless again lost in the moment.

“Bobby, are you okay?” Katie asked him.

“Oh, I’m fine really. I just can’t believe how much she looks like you. It’s like getting a Christmas present that you’ve waited for all year,” he answered.

“Well, I’m not giving you my cousin, Bobby. But as long as you act like a complete gentleman, then you’re more than welcome to come over here and see her,” Katie told him.

Bobby turned and looked at little Katie. “So how long are you going to be here?” he asked her.

“How long am I going to be here? I live here now, silly,” little Katie told him.

“Really? You live here?” he asked her as his smile grew even bigger.

“You two go play, but don’t go getting all dirty, okay? As soon as the rest of the people get here, we’ll get started,” Katie said as she turned and walked away.

Rick and Mike showed up about thirty minutes later. Everyone lined up and took their positions while Paul and Grady instructed everyone on what their jobs and duties were. The rehearsal itself consisted of everything from the point where the two brides exited the two carriages.

Elizabeth was Katie’s maid of honor with little Katie as her flower girl and Bobby being her ring bearer.

Aunt Mary was Melissa’s maid of honor with Cindy as her flower girl and Ricky as her ring bearer.

They went over and over the ceremony until everyone knew their part. The next time that they would all do this would be for the real thing. They did have to make some last-minute changes to their plans. They originally had planned to repeat their vows as they were kneeling before the altar. But that was changed because of the girls’ dresses. They simply couldn’t stand up after kneeling down, so they decided to do it as each couple stood facing each other. A microphone would be positioned before each couple.

They were also planning on having both flower girls walking up the ramp together, followed by the two ring bearers, but Bobby said that it would look better if he was walking next to little Katie. Everyone knew why he had suggested it, but they also had to agree with him. It would indeed look better.

The total rehearsal lasted three full hours before everything was settled, and everyone knew their places. After everyone was happy with everything, Grady and Paul started the barbeque, and everyone sat down to steaks and baked potatoes. Some of the workers even joined in their feast. Grady had made sure that he had more than enough food on hand.

By six o’clock that evening, the workers had finished everything, and for the most part, they had cleaned up their mess and had gone home. But

all of them promised that they would be back tomorrow. Most of them said that they wouldn't miss it for the world.

Katie and Melissa did learn about one of the secrets that the mayor had warned them about. That happened by accident when Katie had inquired about the music for the ceremony and the dancing that would follow during the reception. Paul accidentally, or maybe on purpose, let the cat out of the bag. The Mattersonville High School marching band would be doing all of the musical arrangements including the ceremony itself. But they wouldn't be wearing their band uniforms. Instead they would all be wearing white pants and shirts, with red blazers to set them off as musicians.

Elizabeth walked up to Katie as she was talking to Melissa. She waited until they were done talking. "Hey, that little boy that's following my Katie around is quiet a smooth talker isn't he and talking about being polite," she told her.

"Oh, yeah, he'll charm you right off of your feet if you let him, but as far as being a gentleman, you have nothing to worry about. Katie is as safe with him as she would be if she was with us," Katie replied.

"Oh, I wasn't worried about that, not at all, but I just can't get over how polite he is," Elizabeth replied.

"Yeah, he is at that, but I just knew that those two would be friends," Katie answered back.

"Well, his sister Cindy, she's about the cutest little thing that I've ever seen as well. I bet she looks a lot like her mother," Elizabeth told her.

"Well, I'm sorry to say that their mother died a few years ago. But their father is a really nice man, and he's coming to work here in a few weeks. I guess Daddy gave him a job," Katie told her.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know, but it seems to me that their father is doing one hell of a job as a single parent. And trust me, I should know it's not an easy task," Elizabeth told her.

"Yeah, but you did a pretty good job yourself raising Katie and all. She's so smart that she cracks me up. I know that Uncle Jack is looking down on you two, and he's proud of both of you," Katie told her.

“Well, I tried to do what I thought was best. I wasn’t always sure of my decisions, but I had to believe that what I was doing was the right thing to do. I had to believe in myself. And that, Katie, had to be the hardest part of it all,” Elizabeth confessed to her.

Just about that time, little Katie ran up to them. Bobby was hot on her heels. “Katie, Katie, something is wrong. Uncle Grady is going to be so mad when he finds out,” the little girl proclaimed as she jumped around.

Her cousin just grabbed her by the shoulders. “Katie, slow down. What’s wrong? Why is Uncle Grady going to be upset?” she asked her little cousin.

“Somebody forgot them. Somebody didn’t remember them,” she told her cousin.

“Somebody forgot what?” Katie asked her again.

“The vegetables. There wasn’t any vegetables with dinner. We always have vegetables with dinner, but somebody forgot to cook them,” little Katie proclaimed.

Katie and Elizabeth started laughing.

“Why are you laughing?” the little girl asked them.

“Well, it seems that a very special girl told her uncle that she didn’t like vegetables, so her uncle said no more veggies on Fridays,” Katie told her.

The little girl’s eyes opened wide as she listened to her cousin. “Really? No more vegetables on Fridays? Uncle Grady did that just for me?” she asked.

“Go ask him yourself,” Katie told her.

“I will! Thank you, cousin. Come on, Bobby, let’s go find my uncle. Good-bye, Mom,” the little girl said as she ran off.

Elizabeth never got a chance to answer her daughter. Katie was gone before she knew it. Luckily for Katie, Grady was only a few tables away. She ran up to him and threw her arms around his neck and gave him a big hug and several kisses on the cheek.

“Wow, what did I do to deserve that?” he asked.

Katie leaned toward his ear and whispered, “No vegetables on Fridays.”

Grady just smiled at his niece. “You’re welcome, sweetheart,” he told her. She answered him with another hug and kiss. And she and Bobby were off again. Grady watched as the two kids ran off toward the barn. He just laughed to himself.

By eight o’clock that night, everyone had gone home. There was so much anticipation in the air that you could almost cut it with a knife. Grady and Paul had cleared the area of any trash that had been left over from the barbeque.

Somewhere around ten, Grady thought that he had heard a noise outside, so he went out onto the porch. He was surprised to see his daughter Katie kneeling before the altar. He didn’t say anything, but he knew in his heart that she was either praying or talking with her mother.

# Katie Talks to Her Mom and Dad

Katie was in fact talking to her mother. “Mom, I hope you’re listening. I’m really scared about tomorrow. I’m not having any second thoughts about marrying Mike. He’s a good man, Mom, and I know that you would approve of him. But I’m really nervous about everything that the townspeople have done for us. I know that you can see this. Isn’t this just too much to comprehend? Everyone has poured their hearts and souls into this. And they did this for all for us. So I need to ask you for some help here. And yeah, I do remember what you told me about you helping me, and I know that you normally don’t do this. I’m not even sure that you can do anything, but please ask God if he’ll let you help me just this one time. I really need to know that everything is going to run perfectly tomorrow. I mean I’d hate to ruin it by tripping or something. I’m not too sure that I could ever face the townspeople again if I messed this up. And please help us to remember the lines to our vows. We wrote them, and they’re simply beautiful, but it wouldn’t help if we forgot them. So I guess I’m basically asking you to make sure that everything flows smoothly. And I do wish that you were here to see this in person. I know that Daddy is proud of me, but I sure would love it if you were here too. But I guess I’ll let you go now. I’ve got to go and at least try to get some sleep. I love you, Mom, and I miss you so much. And, God, if you’re listening, thank you for everything. And I do mean everything, but I do have one personal request of you. I mean, it’s more for little Katie, Lord. Please don’t take her mother away too soon. I know what it’s like to grow up without a mother, Lord, and I hope that she doesn’t have to go through that too soon. I know that you’re really busy, so I’ll leave you so you can tend to the more important things in this world. Thank you, Lord. Amen.

Katie slowly stood up and stared up into the sky for a few minutes and then turned to walk back toward the house. She stopped when she saw her daddy watching her from the porch. As Katie came down the ramp, Grady walked down off of the porch.

“So did you say everything that you needed to say?” he asked her.

“Yeah, I did, or at least I think so. So how long have you been standing there?” she asked him.

“Long enough, I suppose. Come on, let’s sit for a spell so we can talk,” he said as he pulled two chairs out from their rows. Katie sat down in one as Grady took the other one.

Grady looked at his daughter. “So are you nervous about tomorrow or what?” he asked her.

“Nervous? Me nervous, are you serious or what?” she asked.

“Well, are you?” he asked again.

“More than you’ll ever know, Daddy,” she responded.

“Well, I guess you have every reason in the world to be nervous. There’s going to be a lot of people watching you tomorrow. And don’t forget the governor will be here too,” he told her.

“Daddy, I really don’t think you’re helping the situation any,” she responded.

“Well, I’m just saying that the little girl that I raised into a beautiful young lady has never let herself down before, and I just can’t see her starting now. You’re one strong woman, Katie. You always have been. That’s your mother’s side of the family that you were lucky enough to inherit.

“But I have all of the faith in the world in you. No father could ever be more proud or confident in their daughter than I am in you,” he told her.

“Really? I mean, you’re proud of me?” she asked.

“You know that I am,” he replied.

“Yes, I do, but I like it when you say it,” she answered with a smile on her face.

“Really, maybe I don’t tell you often enough, but it’s like saying that I love you. I suppose that you already know, and saying it is just a useless phrase. But still a parent tells their kids that just to reassure them from time

to time. But you know that I love you, and I'm mighty proud of my little girl. Don't ya?" he asked.

"Yeah, I do, Daddy, and I love you too," she answered.

"There's a phrase that's somewhat outdated. My little girl. I look at you, and I realize that my little girl is all grown up. And standing in her place is this beautiful, charming young lady. I miss my little girl that used to sit on my lap and laugh when I tickled her. I miss that little girl that used to draw me pictures or sing me songs that she had just made up. I miss that little girl that used to bring me a handful of flowers that she had just picked. But honestly, I wouldn't trade any one of those memories for anything in the world," he told her.

"Gee, Daddy, you're going to make me cry again," she told him.

"Ain't nothing wrong with crying, especially when you're rememberin' the good things in your life. I still cry when I think of your mother, and I realize just how much I really do miss her. But that's a good thing, I guess, 'cause it tells me that I still love her. Just like you, I'll always love you, dear. You may become Mike's wife tomorrow, and someday you'll more than likely be a mother too, but the beauty of all this is this, Katie. You'll always be my little girl. No matter how old you get, you'll still be my little girl," he told her.

"Thank you, Daddy dear. I like being your little girl. But what if I can't be a good wife? Who do I turn to then?" she asked.

"You, Katie Windslow, not being a good wife? Impossible. But whenever you think that you need some guidance along the way, just remember this. There's a part of your mother inside of you too. And there's never been a better wife than your mother was to me. You have to have faith in yourself, and you, Katie Windslow, have more faith in yourself than anyone else I know. So I think that you'll be fine," he told her.

Katie reached over and gave her daddy a hug. "Thank you, Daddy for everything that you've done for me and everything that you've ever given me," she told him as she gently kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re welcome, dear. But I really think that you need to be getting to bed. You have a really big day ahead of you tomorrow. And I wouldn’t worry about tomorrow if I were you. You’ll be fine, trust me,” he told her.

“You know that I do,” Katie told him as the two of them started walking up to the house.

Then Katie stopped at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the porch.

“What’s the matter dear?” Grady asked her.

“What happened to the screen door?” Katie asked.

“Gee, I guess someone must have stolen the darn thing,” he answered.

“Daddy, nobody goes around stealing screen doors,” she replied.

“Yeah, I guess not. Well then, I guess I took it off and tossed it in the trash. Looks a lot better without it, doesn’t it?” he asked her.

“Sure does. I always thought that it was ugly anyways,” she answered with a smile.

“Really? I think you had better concentrate on getting some sleep there, dear. Let me worry about the important stuff like screen doors and such,” Grady responded.

“That’s a deal! Good night, Daddy,” she said as she gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Good night, Katie,” he answered as he watched his little girl walk up into the house. She certainly wasn’t a little girl anymore.

# The Morning of the Big Day

Saturday was finally here. Melissa had spent the night so she wouldn't be late. Her parents however arrived at six in the morning so they could help their daughter out. And if Grady needed some help, they would be there for him as well. Melissa was a nervous wreck. Katie, on the other hand, was as calm as she could be.

Vi was there by seven. Paul and Mary arrived right after her.

Melissa looked at Katie. "Aren't you just a little bit nervous?" she asked her.

"No, not at all. Why would I be nervous?" she answered.

"Why? This is our wedding day. There's going to be around five thousand people out there watching us today. Why wouldn't you be nervous?" Melissa responded.

"First off, there's only thirty-five hundred people in this town, so there ain't going to be no five thousand people out there, and if there is, so what? I know what I have to do, and I have all the faith in the world that you all know what you're supposed to do, so what is there to be nervous about?" Katie replied.

"What? Last night you were shaking and everything, and now this morning you're as calm as calm can be. Have you been in your daddy's whiskey again?" Melissa asked her.

"Heavens no! I just talked to my mom last night, and then I sat down and had a heart-to-heart talk with my daddy, and this morning, I feel fine," Katie responded.

"Okay, Katie, you know that there's times like this that I could really hate you, don't you?" Melissa responded.

"Yeah, maybe, but you could never really hate me. Not for long anyways," she told her as she put her arm around Melissa's shoulder.

“God, Katie, do you have to be right all the time?” Melissa said as she returned the hug.

“Yes, I guess that I do at that!” Katie said as the two girls started laughing with each other.

At nine o’clock sharp, there was a knock on the door. Grady opened the door to find three men all dressed in suits standing before him. Grady recognized them at once. It was the three guys from the cave. He couldn’t remember their names, but that really didn’t matter much.

“Well, hey there, guys. Can I help you?” he asked them.

“I know that we weren’t invited or anything, but we thought that we owed it to your daughter, so we thought that we would offer our help in any way we could,” Delroy told him.

“You guys just keep on impressing me, but of course, you’re invited, but I don’t know what you could do, but I’m sure that we’ll find something for ya to do. But you’ll have to excuse me, I don’t recall your names,” Grady told him.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m Delroy, and that’s Billy Ray, and he’s Leroy. And our girlfriends are here to offer their help as well,” he said as he pointed to three very beautiful girls standing not more than twenty feet away.

“Those are your girlfriends? Boy, this will knock Katie for a loop for sure. Come on in,” he told them. The girls came in as well.

Grady introduced them to everyone, but decided to leave out the part about how they had met. That wasn’t real important anyways.

“Well, what do you think, Paul? Can we find something for them to do. They’ve offered us their help,” Grady asked him.

“Well gee, let’s see. I can’t think of anything during the ceremony itself, but during the reception, we could use some food servers, and the ladies could walk around getting drinks or snacks. If they want to do that, that would help, I guess,” he told him.

“Well, there it is. You can help with the reception if you like,” he told them.

“That would be great. We’ll do anything to help our friend,” Billy Ray answered.

Grady heard Katie in the kitchen. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll tell her that you’re here,” he told them as he headed for the kitchen.

Grady found his daughter in the kitchen swapping stories with Mary. “Katie, I need to talk to you,” he told her.

“Sure, Dad. If you’ll excuse me, Mary, I’ll be right back, and we can pick up right where we left off,” she told her. Mary said okay.

Katie walked over to the corner of the kitchen with her dad. “What’s up daddy?” she asked.

“You’ll never guess who just showed up and offered their help in anyway that they can. They said that they owe it to you,” he told her.

“Who? They said that they owed it to me? Who is it?” she asked.

“Do the names Delroy, Billy Ray, and Leroy mean anything to you?” he asked.

“You’re kidding! The guys from the cave. They’re here now?” she asked.

“Yeah, and they brought three very beautiful girl friends with them as well. They just want to help, is all,” he told her.

“Well, I’ve got to see this,” she said as she left the kitchen. She recognized the guys at once. She just stopped and stared. Surely, these couldn’t be the same three guys that were in the cave. No way, just no way.

“Hello, Ms. Windslow, I hope you don’t mind us offering our help. After all, we kind of owe it to you,” Delroy told her.

“My gosh! Just look at you three. You guys look great. I can’t believe this,” Katie told him.

“Well, we have some people who are just dying to meet you,” Leroy told her as he pointed to the three women standing behind him.

Katie walked up to the ladies and started to speak, but one of the ladies stopped her. "Excuse me, I really don't mean to be rude, but a few weeks ago, these guys were pretty much the scum of the earth. They never worked. Hell, they never even took a bath. But then something happened, something that changed their lives forever. It took the three of us weeks of steady pounding and hounding on them until they finally came clean with us. They told us everything. And I do mean everything. And what you did for them that night changed not only their lives but ours as well. Leroy is enrolled in college and works part-time. Delroy works full-time and even started going to church. And Billy Ray and I are getting married next spring. He leaves the following week for Marine Corps. I don't why you decided to cut them a break that night. I really don't care. All I know is your act of kindness has touched so much that we all felt that we had to show up today to offer our help to the only person to ever see any good in these guys. And while you may not know us, we really do love you, Katie Windslow," the lady told her.

Katie just stood there. She was speechless. She didn't know what to say. As she stood there taking everything in, the tears started forming in her eyes.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I don't know what to say. That's the best story that I have ever heard. You've caught me totally off guard," she told all of them.

"There's nothing more for you to say. You said enough that night back in the cave, don't you see?" she told Katie.

"I just did what I thought was the right thing to do. And it appears that it's paid off. You guys did this for yourselves and for your ladies too. You should all be proud of yourselves," Katie told them.

"Oh, we're proud all right. We're proud to say that you're a very close and dear friend, Katie Windslow. And if you ever need anything, anything at all, we want you to know that you have six friends here that are ready to help anytime you need us," Leroy told her.

Katie put her hands over her face and started crying. The girl that had done the talking came over to her and gave her a hug. Katie returned the

hug. The other two ladies came over and joined in the group hug.

“I’m sorry, I’m just so happy for all of you,” Katie told them.

“You’re happy for us? This is your wedding day. We’re happy for you. And on behalf of all of us, we’d like to wish you and your husband-to-be the happiest and most romantic marriage ever. You’ve earned it,” the girl told her.

Katie didn’t answer. She was too busy crying. More now than ever.

Mary walked up to Katie. “Come on, dear, it’s time to get ready,” she told her.

“Did you hear what they said?” she asked. “How sweet!”

“Yes, I did, every word. You all are our guests. Please make yourselves at home,” she told them as she led Katie away.

Susie Barnes was outside overseeing everything. She had taken it upon herself to see that everything was in its place. And she was doing a great job at it. Grady walked up to her and smiled at her. “Susie, I’d like to say thank you for all of this.”

“I didn’t do anything? Really,” she answered.

“We all know that this was all your idea, Susie. And I have to admit, I was wrong about you, and for that, I do apologize,” he told her.

“No you were right about me, back then anyways. But your daughter showed me a better way to live my life. And for that, I’m very grateful. This is the least that I can do for the only person ever to give me a chance at redemption,” Susie answered.

“Well, just let me say this. We all like the new Susie Barnes. You should be proud of yourself for turning your life around like you have. I’m just sorry that your father brought all of you into this. He seemed like a nice man at one time. I hope that he too can change his life around for the better,” Grady told her.

“My father shot and killed your brother. I don’t think there’s any hope of redemption for him, not anytime soon anyways. But your words of kindness are very much appreciated just the same,” she replied.

“Well, maybe your dad will find redemption within himself or with God. We can all use a little God in our lives,” he told her.

“That we can. But if I may be so bold as to ask you a question,” she said.

“Sure, ask away,” he told her.

“Well, my father shot and killed your brother, but he was also responsible for the death of your wife as I’ve been told. But you all keep treating my mother and I like nothing ever happened. How can you do that? I mean considering everything that has happened and all?” she asked.

“Oh, that’s an easy one to answer. Well, as I see it, we could take it out on you and your family I guess, but it won’t bring my wife back or my brother. Would it? No, it wouldn’t. So why would we go around blaming those that had nothing to do with what happened in the first place? It would be a total waste of time and energy, wouldn’t it? It would prove to be far more productive to judge each and every person on their own merits in life. Now granted that what you had planned for my daughter that night in the cave was very sick and twisted to say the least, but it didn’t happen, did it? Had it had happened, I couldn’t swear to you that we would be here talking now, could I? But Katie had her reasons for doing everything that she did, and as her father, I have to respect her decisions. Right or wrong, I have to respect them. But in this case, I have to admit that while my daughter’s actions were, well, unfounded, I guess, her decisions were very well justified. I mean just look at you now. Who would have guessed all of this? Katie, that’s who,” he told her.

“Well, I’m glad that it never happened, and I apologize for ever thinking it up, but you’re right about your daughter. Katie is one in a million. But I do have to say thank you anyways. It’s an honor for me to be helping with your daughter’s wedding. I owe her so much more than I could ever hope to repay,” Susie told him.

“Well you just keep on being the Susie that we all love, just like you’re doing, and I’m sure that it will be payment enough,” he told her as he gave her a slight hug and a fast peck on the cheek.

As Grady started making his way back to the house, he glanced down the driveway. He was expecting this, but the mere sight of it still shocked him. There was a steady line of cars entering the driveway, and the line of cars that followed stretched well beyond his line of sight.

Everywhere he looked, people were running around trying to get everything into place. The chairs alone numbered up into the three thousand mark. Endless rolls of tables stretched out as far as he could see through all of the people. And the cake, the wedding cake, that was a story in and by itself.

The cake was so big that they had to build a special table just to hold it. It measured in at four feet long, three feet wide, and nearly five feet tall. It was a masterpiece all by itself. First off, there were four four-layer cakes placed in the corners of a square with another four-layer cake serving as the middle support. Ten-inch white plastic pillars rose up from the center cake to support another four-layer cake and then another. The top of the cake was topped off with two grooms standing by their respected brides. Four eight-inch white plastic bridges were placed from the four outer cakes connecting them to the center cake. But what caught everyone's attention other than the size of this cake was the very well-done decorating that adorned the finished cake. The frosting was done in white with very fine flowers of soft pink, purple, and yellow, encircling each cake. The flowers matched the flowers that covered the stage and handrails. The scrollwork that surrounded each cake was as precise as precise could ever be. It was a true work of art. You could smell the aroma of the creamy frosting from a few feet away. A small card lay on the table in front of the cake. It read, "Courtesy of the Mattersonville High School, Home Economics Class."

Grady had no idea just how long the students had slaved to build such a cake, but surely, they had all gotten an A for their efforts.

"Well, at least we won't run out of cake, that's for sure," he said as he stared at the giant cake that sat before him.

Robert Kincaid kept to his promise as well. He was there taking picture after picture. He must have had used an entire roll of film on the cake alone.

“This is going to be one hell of a story, that’s for sure,” he said to himself as he lined another picture of the cake up in the viewfinder of his camera.

Meanwhile back in the house . . .

One hour away from the start of the ceremony, and everyone was a buzz with activities. Everyone except for Paul. He sat there at the dining room table, sipping another cup of coffee. His work was done. Hell, he had even added a little surprise inside the carriages. It wasn’t that big of a deal to add it, but it would prove to be a very special addition to the ceremony.

Every person in the wedding party was there. Everyone except for the grooms anyways, but they weren’t supposed to be there for another half an hour. And Grady and Paul had made an opening in the back fence that would allow them to get there without having to wade through the steady line of traffic that, as expected, was building up outside the Matterson House property. The governor and Judge Harlow also had access to this secret gate. They hadn’t arrived yet either.

Grady walked in and poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down across from Paul. “Have you seen that cake? It’s the biggest cake that I have ever seen,” he told him.

“Seen it? I brought it over here this morning. Had to borrow a truck, just to transport the darn thing. But I think it will blow the girls away, that’s for sure,” he answered.

“Oh, yeah, that’s for sure. Can you believe everything that the people of this town have done for this wedding?” he asked him.

“After seeing all of this, I don’t ever think I will ever be surprised again. But they’ve certainly surpassed even my wildest expectations, that’s for sure. And remember when all of this came down, and you told the town council that nobody was supposed to bring any wedding gifts?” he asked.

“Yeah, why do you ask that?” Grady asked him.

“Because nobody listened. Everyone is bringing gifts. And I do mean everyone,” he told him.

“You’re kidding! They weren’t supposed to,” Grady answered.

“Yeah, but what are you going to do? Return them? You can’t do that. It would be an insult of the worse kind,” he answered.

“Well, that’s true. So I guess, we’ll deal with it all later. Sounds like the newlyweds will have a lot of thank-you cards to answer. Doesn’t it?” he asked.

“To say the least, yes, they’ll be busy for some time to come,” Paul answered.

Mary and Elizabeth came downstairs followed by Cindy and little Katie. Paul and Grady stood up to meet them.

“Well just look at you ladies. Wow, where did you ever get matching dresses?” Grady asked.

“Hey I have a few connections too,” Mary added.

“Yeah, but they’re very similar to the girls’ wedding gowns. How did you ever do that?” Paul asked.

“Okay, so I have some really good connections, okay?” she added.

“Well, I’m impressed to say the least. And I’m sure that the girls will be too,” Grady told them.

“Just wait until you get a sight of the grooms and the ring bearers. You think we look good?” Elizabeth remarked.

“Please tell me that they’re not wearing dresses too,” Paul said with a laugh.

“Only at your wedding, dear brother,” Mary added.

“Okay, I deserved that one, I suppose,” Paul answered, not laughing nearly as much.

Just then Bobby and Ricky walked into the room. They were dressed in white tuxedos with purple lapels. To their left chest was affixed a boutonniere that was a mixture of light purple, yellow, and white colors. They were two very handsome guys.

“Wow look at you two, gentlemen. I’m not sure who’s getting married today,” Grady told them.

Bobby wasn't listening as he walked up to little Katie. "Wow, you look beautiful in that dress, Katie," he told her.

"Well, thank you, Bobby, you look mighty handsome too," Katie responded.

"Well, Grady, I think it's time for us to go get changed too," Paul told him.

"Yeah I feel really out of place here among all of these well-dressed people here," he replied. "Mary, would you and Elizabeth please keep a lookout for Judge Harlow and the governor. They should be here shortly along with our two grooms," he asked them.

"Sure, no problem. You all go get dressed. We'll be here if anyone needs anything," Mary responded.

Grady and Paul disappeared into the downstairs bedrooms to get ready.

Vi looked at the two brides that stood before her. She had brought a friend with her to help in getting the two brides ready in time.

"Well, what do you think?" Vi asked her friend Anita.

"Simply breathtaking to say the least," Anita responded.

Katie looked over at Melissa, and Melissa returned the look.

"You look so beautiful! God, you're one good-looking bride!" Katie told her.

"Thanks, Katie, I feel beautiful. And if I look just half as beautiful as you do, then I know that I look really good," Melissa answered.

"All right, you two, you both look as beautiful as the other one does. But I do have to say this. While you both looked good, the other day when you tried these dresses on, having your hair and makeup done now just adds to your beauty. You two are going to be the most glamorous brides ever to walk down the aisle," Vi told the two brides that stood before her. She turned to look at Annabelle that had been there throughout the entire transformation process.

"So what do you think of your little girl now?" Vi asked her.

“I can’t believe what I’m seeing. You’re so beautiful, dear. It’s hard for me to picture you growing up. I could almost cry. And, Katie dear, you’re just as beautiful. Those dresses just bring out every bit of your feminine beauty. Thank you, Vi, your skill at dressmaking is unsurpassed,” she told them.

“Well, your compliments are appreciated. But not to bang on my own drum here, I don’t think that you’ll ever see a more beautiful bride than these two here,” Vi responded.

“Maybe so, but if we are, we owe it all to you. These dresses are just the most. Thank you again,” Katie responded.

“I agree with her. Thank you, Vi. You have exceeded my wildest expectations this time,” Melissa added.

“Well, you’re both very welcome. I really enjoyed being a part of this, the wedding of all weddings,” Vi answered.

Through the back gate, a motorcade slowly made its way into the Matterson House property. It consisted of six black sedans that were led by a sheriff’s car and followed by another sheriff vehicle. The cars slowly pulled up to the back of Matterson House.

Several men stepped from the front vehicles while more of them exited the back cars. They slowly made their way to the three center sedans. As they opened the doors, out stepped Judge Harlow, the governor of the state of Georgia, followed by his wife. From the other two sedans came two senators and three congressmen. As the men stood around their cars, another car came through the gate. It was Rick and Mike, all dressed and ready for what lay ahead. The men that came out of the front cars and the back cars stepped in front of the governor and the other state officials. It wasn’t until Mike and Rick exited their cars that the men realized that the two men in the car posed no threat to anyone.

Mike and Rick both recognized the judge and the governor from pictures that they had seen in the newspapers from time to time.

“Your Honor and Governor Wilson, I’d like to welcome you all to Matterson House and to our wedding as well. It’s a tremendous honor to

have all of you here with us here today. We hope that you'll enjoy the ceremony here today," Mike said as he shook their hands.

"You're Michael, is that right, Katie's soon-to-be husband?" Judge Harlow asked.

"Yes, sir, I am," Mike responded.

"So that would make you Melissa's fiancé, Rick?" the judge asked Rick.

"Yes, sir, Your Honor, thank you for coming," Rick said as he shook the judge's hand.

"Let me introduce you to some very close friends of ours. You already know our governor, George Wilson, and this beautiful lady here is his lovely wife, Ann," the judge told him.

Mike and Rick welcomed the lady to their ceremony by shaking her hand.

"Thank you for coming today," Rick told her.

"The pleasure is all mine," she responded.

"And these fine gentlemen are Senators Mat McConnell and Jason Berks, and these three men are Congressmen Richard Hatch, Steven Long, and Sam Sage," the judge told them.

Mike and Rick shook each of the men's hands and welcomed all of them to Matterson House.

"So if you all would please follow us, we'll get you inside and introduce you to everyone else," Mike told them.

"Excuse me for a second, son," the governor asked as he spun around and told his security attachment to stand down and wait by the cars until they were finished.

"Huh? Excuse me, sir, but if your men would like to see everything, we do have far more than enough chairs out front. I mean if that's okay with you, sir?" Mike suggested to the governor.

“Brilliant idea, son. Well, you heard him. If you would like to see everything, then you may all take seats out front. Just don’t let me beat you back to the cars. Just kidding, you men may enjoy yourself,” the governor told the men of his security attachment. He turned back toward Mike. “Please carry on, son,” he told him.

“Yes, sir. Right this way if you would please,” Mike said as he led the group of men past the two carriages and into the house. Every one of the men stared at the carriages as they walked by them.

“Those are mighty impressive,” the judge told Michael.

“Thank you, Your Honor, but the magic happens when the brides are in them,” Mike responded.

“That goes without saying,” the governor’s wife said as she stared at the carriages.

Paul and Grady were just returning from getting dressed as the men walked into the room.

Mike and Rick introduced everyone to everyone else, but it was little Katie and Cindy that stole the show. When it came time to introduce the two little girls, both of them walked right up to the governor and his wife and pulled off a picture-perfect curtsy. “We’re very pleased to meet you,” They said in unison as they did it.

“Aw, how precious. What charming little angels,” the governor’s wife told her husband.

“Yes, very charming indeed,” her husband responded.

“Well, I hate to rush you off, Governor, but we’re just about to get this ceremony started, so if I could get you to take your seats, sir, I’ll get you an escort to your seats,” Grady told the governor.

“Well, by all means, please don’t let us slow up the show,” he responded.

Grady walked out onto the porch where he saw Delroy and Billy Ray standing next to each other. “Hey, guys, I need your help for a minute,” Grady told them.

“Sure, Mr. Windslow, what do you need us to do?” Billy Ray asked.

“Would you please escort the governor and his wife to their reserved seats along with the senators and congressmen. Those are the seats with the red ribbon across them. Can you do that for me please?” Grady asked the two men.

“The governor . . . governor and his wife?” Billy Ray asked in shock.

“Yes, the governor and his wife. Can you please do this for me?” Grady asked again.

“Yes, sir. It would be an honor, sir,” Billy Ray answered.

“Fine, thank you. Governor, if I could please get you to follow these two gentlemen, they’ll take you to your seats,” Grady told the governor.

“No problem,” the governor said as he stepped outside onto the front porch for the first time. All of the men were shocked when they saw just how many people were there. They knew that the entire town was supposed to be here, but there’s a really big difference between knowing and actually seeing that many people all gathered in one place.

“Wow, I don’t think I had this many people at my party after I won my last election,” the governor said with a chuckle.

“Wow, look at all of this stuff! This is very, very impressive. No wonder why everyone is calling this the wedding of all weddings,” his wife proclaimed.

Mike and Rick were in a state of shock too when they first saw Mary and Elizabeth all dressed up. Then they were shocked again when they saw Cindy and Katie along with Bobby and Ricky.

“Oh my god! Just look at all of you all dressed up. You’re all so, so stunning. You all look simply grand,” Mike told them.

“Oh yeah! I have to agree with Michael. You all look great,” Rick added.

“Now, guys, just relax. Don’t stop complimenting us, just relax, okay?” Elizabeth told them.

“Well, you two guys, look pretty handsome too,” Mary added.

“Really? You don’t think our tuxedos are too much? I mean, I would hate to outshine the girls,” Rick said jokingly.

“Forget it, guys. I’ve seen the girls in the wedding dresses, and believe me, there’s no way you could ever hope to outshine them. Not today anyways,” Paul told them.

“Really, they look that good, do they? I can’t wait to see the girls all dressed up,” Mike told him.

“Well, whenever you guys are ready to take your places, we can get this show on the road,” Grady told them.

“Gee, Rick, are you ready to do this?” Mike asked.

“Well, if you can ask me again in about a week or so, I’ll let you know,” he said as he started laughing.

“Really, are you guys all ready?” Paul asked them.

“About as ready as we’re going to be, I guess,” Mike answered.

# The Wedding of All Weddings

“Okay then, get the other people in here and let’s do this,” Paul told them.

Once they had all of the kids there, they made a quick check to make sure everyone knew where to stand and a double-check to make sure that the ring bearers had the right rings in their possession. Once everything was set, Paul would go out and give the musicians the signal to start the music. Grady would go upstairs and tell the girls that it was time to start.

Everything was set as Paul signaled for the music to start. Judge Harlow took his place behind the podium. Mike and Rick took their position next to each other with Katie and Bobby directly behind them, and Ricky and Cindy taking up the rear.

As the music started playing, the men started the rather slow walk up the ramp to their positions off to the side of the altar, with Mike on the left and Rick on the right of the altar. Bobby and Katie stepped in behind Mike while Cindy and Rick took their position behind Rick.

At the back of the house, Katie and Melissa were getting into the carriages. Paul was there to show them his little surprise. “Okay, ladies, when you get behind the altar, right when you pass each other, I want you to pull these strings. A fast thug is all you’ll need. When you pull the strings, it will pull the pins on these two boxes, one in each carriage. These boxes have spring-loaded lids. As they pop open, there’s twenty-five white doves in each box. Trust me, they’ll fly upward as soon as you pop the lid.

“Nobody will know where they came from, but everyone will see fifty white doves flying up into the air,” he explained to the ladies.

“Where did you ever find fifty white doves?” Katie asked him.

“I didn’t. They’re pigeons, but nobody will ever know the difference. Okay?” he confessed to them.

“Doves, pigeons who cares? I like it. Thanks, Paul,” Melissa answered.

“Good luck, ladies, do not get out of the carriages until your fathers help you out, okay? Remember everything that you do until after the ceremony you do together, okay? Each step that you take, every turn you make, you’ll want to do them together. Okay?” he asked them.

“Together, got it,” Melissa answered.

“I’ll see you after you’re married,” he told them.

Paul left the ladies alone with their drivers. Each girl sat there spinning their white-laced umbrellas behind their heads, waiting for the signal to start the rides of their lives.

Mary and Elizabeth took their places at the bottom of the ramp. The musicians were playing a preselected arrangements of easy and soft melodies. But when the signal was given, the horn section sounded loud and clear. It was a signal to everyone that the ceremony was about to start and a signal to the drivers to start their carriages on the path of a lifetime. The musicians then started playing the wedding march. Nobody knew about the horses and the carriages. And when they came into view, there were many ooohhs and awwws. There may have been a thousand cameras clicking pictures that day, but only one paper was there to cover the event. And Robert Kincaid had his hands full. He had positioned several preloaded cameras all over the place. When he got to the next camera, he would change cameras even if he still had pictures left.

The carriages’ march was slow at best, a lot slower than anyone might have wanted. Everyone except for the girls, they were on cloud nine, and they weren’t in any hurry to get off. As the carriages passed each other behind the podium, the girls tugged on the strings. And just like Paul had told them, fifty white birds flew up into the air. And nearly everyone in the audience saw the flying birds, and many of them were pointing up into the sky at the flying birds.

Slowly, the carriages made their turn toward the bottom of the ramp. The horses stopped with their noses only inches away from each other. Grady walked up to Katie’s carriage just as Melissa’s dad walked up to hers. As each of the proud fathers reached up to take their daughters’ hands, the girls stood up and placed their hands into the hands of their fathers.

Slowly and together, the girls stepped down from their carriages. And for the very first time, everyone, including the grooms, got a sight of the gowns that the ladies were wearing. Mike and Rick just stared at their future wives. Their jaws dropped as they got a full visual image of their ladies in the very finest moment. There were many more ooohhs and awwws from the audience. As the two fathers turned toward the ramp, the girls turned in unison until the fathers were next to each other. They stopped long enough for Mary and Elizabeth to fall in behind the brides and stoop down and gently lift up the trails of the brides' dresses. Then in step with the music, they slowly, one step at a time, made their way up to the top of the ramp where their soon-to-be-husbands were waiting for them to join them.

Katie and Melissa both felt like a million bucks, but Mike and Rick would have paid a lot more. Then the music soon started to die down until it disappeared altogether. Judge Harlow stepped up to the microphone. "Family, friends, and honored guests, we welcome all of you to this ceremony where we celebrate the joining of these two couples into the institution of marriage."

The judge looked at Grady. "Who giveth this woman to this man?" he asked.

Grady responded, "I do, Your Honor, as her father."

Then the judge looked at Frank Gibbes. "And who giveth this woman to this man?" he asked.

Frank responded, "I do, Your Honor, as her father."

"Very well," the judge told them as the fathers stepped aside and the grooms stepped into their place.

The brides turned to their flower girls and received their bouquet of flowers. They turned to face the podium again.

"Before I join these two couples as husband and wife, I'd like to talk about what a marriage consists of. It's far more than a title that you'll wear. In marriage, you agree to accept each other for better or for worse. You agree to tend to each other in the times of sickness. You agree to be there for each other with mutual moral support. You agree to be there at each

other's side throughout your lives until death you do part. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? It should, for many of you here today have agreed to the same terms when you stood before God and became husband and wife. But there's more to marriage than what meets the eye. There's dirty laundry and a house to paint. There's a lawn to cut and drapes to hang, isn't there? And these things, as trivial as they might be, are all part of a marriage, aren't they? But I tell you this because these people standing before me today have to know the truth about marriage. Everything ahead of them, from this day forward, will be done as a couple. And it will take understanding and communication to make this or any marriage work. The road ahead of these two couples may not always be smooth. No, in fact, the road ahead of you will be full of bumps and twists and turns. But through communication and love, your marriage will survive.

"Now these people standing before us here today have written their own vows that they wish to read out loud so all of you may bear witness to their love for each other. So I'll allow them to say their vows, for all of you can hear the love in their hearts," the judge said as he took a step back and listened to the two couples before him.

The two couples turned to face their perspective spouses. Katie started them off, "I love you without regrets."

*Mike: "For my heart has spoken."*

*Mel: "From the roots of my very soul."*

*Rick: "My pledge to you will remain unbroken."*

*Katie: "I only ask that you hold me,"*

*Mike: "When it's cold,"*

*Mel: "To keep me warm."*

*Rick: "Will you comfort me,"*

*Katie: "When I'm feeling lost?"*

*Mike: "And my spirit is worn."*

*Mel: "Will you offer me your hand?"*

*Rick: "As we journey through the passing years,"*

*Katie: "Together, we can last the duration,"*

*Mike: "of our lifetime without fears."*

*Mel: "As we plant the seed of our future,"*

*Rick: "Together with the heart of one."*

*Katie: "Every step of the way"*

*Mike: "We shall cultivate it, watching it grow."*

*Mel: "Rejoicing in the growth,"*

*Rick: "of our newly planted love."*

*All: "And it's our love that will make the flowers grow."*

*Katie: "Blossoms of our future will spring to life,"*

*Mike: "with each and every step we take,"*

*Mel: "As we journey down the highway of our lives."*

*Rick: "Wherever the flowers grow,"*

*Katie: "And in those times of trouble,"*

*Mike: "Where a storm lingers on the horizon."*

*Mel: "The flowers will bend, never to break,"*

*Rick: "As our love shines through,"*

*All: "And it's our love that will make the flowers grow."*

*Katie: "The road ahead will be rough and hard to steer."*

*Mike: "This we will find to be true,"*

*Mel: "But with you at my side,"*

*Rick: "We will make it through."*

*All: "To watch the Flowers Grow,"*

*Katie: "And when the darkness comes to one of us,"*

*Mike: "You may rest assured,"*

*Mel: "That the other will carry on with life,"*

*Rick: "With all the spirit of our love."*

*Katie: "But when the darkness calls to them,"*

*Mike: "We will once again be rejoined."*

*Mel: "In God's kingdom high above the clouds,"*

*Rick: "Where we will once again walk, hand in hand."*

*Katie: "Down the pathway of God's eternal life,"*

*Mike: "Just you and I with our love."*

*Mel: "As we sit together in God's kingdom,"*

*Rick: "As we feast on the power of our love,"*

*All: "And it's our love that will make the flowers grow."*

When the couples were finished, they turned to face the judge again. Judge Harlow stepped back up to the podium.

"If there is anyone who has just cause as to why either of these couples should not be joined in holy matrimony, let them speak now or forever hold his peace," the judge said as he paused for a few seconds. He heard nothing, so he continued.

"Michael Gibbes, do you take this woman as your lawfully wedded wife?" he asked.

"I do, Your Honor," Mike said loud and clear.

"And do you, Katie Windslow, do you take this man as your lawfully wedded husband?" he asked her.

"I do, Your Honor," Katie said as she smiled at Michael.

“Rick McIntosh, do you take this woman as your lawfully wedded wife?” he asked.

“I do, Your Honor,” Rick answered.

“And do you, Melissa Gibbes, do you take this man as your lawfully wedded husband?” he asked her.

“I do, Your Honor,” Melissa answered.

“Very well, the rings please,” the judge asked. Mike and Rick turned and received their rings from their ring bearers.

“Now as you slide these symbols of your love onto the fingers of your partner for life, I want you to notice one thing about these rings. Their shape. They’re round, aren’t they? They have no beginning, nor do they have an ending. These rings that you shall wear as a symbol of your love for each other are like your love for each other. It too has no ending. It just keeps going around and around right back to where it all started, right back to your hearts. So as you all finish with the rings, I ask you to turn and face the audience,” the judge said as he waited for the four of them to turn and face the crowd.

“Family, friends, and honored guests, by the power invested in me by the great State of Georgia, I hereby pronounce these two couples to be husband and wife. Gentlemen, you may now kiss your brides.”

Katie and Melissa both had their veils up before the judge had finished talking. Both couples were soon locked into a loving and very affectionate embrace. The audience was going nuts.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please I do have one more thing to say,” the judge said as the crowd started to get quiet again.

“It is my honor to introduce to you for the very first time, Mr. and Mrs. Michael Gibbes and Mr. and Mrs. Rick McIntosh. Congratulations to all of you,” the judge said as the musicians started playing the wedding march again.

The crowd erupted again as they started tossing rice at the newlyweds.

The two couples slowly made their way down the ramp and into the waiting crowd. Katie and Melissa just stopped and looked at each other, and without speaking, they took each other into their arms and hugged each other.

Grady and Frank just stood there on the stage. “Well, what do you think there, Frank? One hell of a wedding, don’t you think?” Grady asked him.

“Oh, yeah. For sure. And I’m not sure if I ever told you this, Grady, but thank you for everything. I really mean it too,” he told Grady.

“Hey, I didn’t do anything. It was all of them that did most of the work, and if you’re talking about all of this stuff, you’ll have to go to the town council to thank them,” Grady responded.

“You know darn well what I’m talking about. It seems that we got a pretty nice check in the mail the other day,” he told him.

“Oh that. Hey, it was your grandfather’s money, so it was only fitting that it should come back to you. But you’re welcome all the same,” Grady answered.

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for you and your daughter,” Frank responded.

“Don’t you mean your daughter-in-law?” Grady said with a huge smile.

“You’re right! I guess I do at that,” Frank said laughing.

Katie and Melissa were being mobbed. Mike and Rick were having a very hard time just keeping up with their new wives. But they did somehow manage to catch back up to them. It was about ten minutes or so before the crowd started to calm down, and some type of order was restored.

“Wow, that was getting pretty nasty there for a while,” Rick said as he caught back up with Melissa again.

“What did you expect? I mean after all, there’s something like four thousand people here, and there’s only four of us. The odds would not appear to be in our favor,” Melissa responded.

“Hey, this many people all trying to be in one spot at one time, and still not one person, not one, mind you, stepped on either of our dresses. That’s

pretty good considerin' how long they are. And even if they had, after everything that they've done for us, to make this day special just for us, who the hell cares? These people are our friends, and I think they deserve to be cut a little slack here," Katie told them.

"I agree, and while you may now be my wife, Katie, and you too are now husband and wife, I think right now, and for the rest of the day even, we all belong to them. They all made this possible, we can't forget that. Ever," Mike said as he put his arm around Katie.

"I agree, okay? All I was saying is that it was getting a little nasty there for a while. That's all," Rick said with a smile.

"You're right, Rick, it was at that, but there's something that I need to say right now," Mike said as he stared at his new bride.

"And what might that be?" Katie asked.

Mike looked at her. She could see the passion in his eyes. "Please tell me that there's no hoop skirt under that dress," he asked with a smile.

"Why, Michael, whatever are you thinkin'? I'll have you know that I am now a married woman, and well, what would my husband say if he were here?" she asked.

"He'd say that you are the most beautiful woman in the world, especially in that dress. And if he had a mind too, he'd take you right back to that barn and finish what he started," Mike told her.

"Oh, he would, would he? Well, he has earned it, I suppose, and what with all of these people standing around here, it would be highly unlikely for us to do anything right here. But to duck away from everyone just to, well, fool around, as they say, well, that might not be the proper thing to do, but then again it might be fun, might it?" Katie answered.

"Fun? I would hardly call it fun. Our first romantic encounter as husband and wife? No, it wouldn't be fun. It would be a fantastic voyage of two souls searching for each other and then finding each other in a single moment of sure bliss," he answered.

“Where did you ever come up with that? That was beautiful. Hell, I might have to take you to the barn after all,” she told him as she pulled him closer for another kiss.

“You guys, aren’t really going to the barn, are ya?” Melissa asked, not yet knowing if they were really serious or not.

“Well I wasn’t planning on it. Well, not right away anyways, but if he keeps talking like that, I might have to,” Katie responded.

“Really, ya take me to the barn, would ya?” Mike asked.

“Cool it, Romeo. I think we need to go cut a cake,” Melissa suggested.

“Fine, I can have my cake and have my wife too,” Mike replied.

“Michael, calm down there, tiger. There’s plenty of time for that later. And I do mean plenty of time if you know what I mean?” she told him.

Michael just smiled at her. “Oh yeah, plenty of time.”

Katie leaned over and whispered into Melissa’s ear. “Has he always been this horny?” she asked

“Hey, you married him? But I think it’s these dresses. Rick is acting hornier than usual too,” Melissa replied.

“Well then, he’s out of luck ’cause I ain’t taking this dress off until I have to. I love the way it makes me feel. I feel like a woman. No, I feel like a beautiful, sexy woman,” she replied.

“I agree. Let the men stress it out until they can’t control themselves any longer, and then we’ll make them work for it,” Melissa added.

“I like your way of thinking, sister-in-law,” Katie answered with a smile across her face.

“Good! I like the sound of that, and by the way, welcome to our family. Now let’s go cut us some cake,” Melissa said as she pulled Rick by the hand behind her. “Come on, lover boy,” she said as she turned and smiled at her new husband.

Katie just looked at Mike. “Come on you too, Romeo,” she said as she put her arm around him and gave him a slight squeeze.

The two couples made their way through the crowd of people, and before they knew it, they were standing in front of their wedding cake.

All four of them just stood there in silence as they stared at the giant cake that sat on the table before them.

“Oh my god! Look at this cake. It’s simply fantastic,” Katie said as she stared at the cake.

“I don’t know if we’re supposed to eat it or worship it. This thing is just . . . wonderful,” Mike added.

Melissa looked up at the towering cake that stood so much taller than she did. “My Lord, what is a person supposed to say when they see something like this? I really can’t think of a single thing to say,” Melissa said as she stared at the cake.

“All of these years, and now I find out how to keep my sister quiet—give her cake. Hey, who knew?” Mike said jokingly.

“Ha ha ha! Brother dear, very funny,” Melissa responded.

Rick didn’t say anything. Just like Melissa had said, what could a person say that hasn’t been said already? He just stared at the monster of a cake that towered before him.

“Well, at least we have enough cake for everyone even if they had seconds, I might add,” he finally spoke up.

Katie and Mike together took a knife in their hands. Rick and Melissa did the same. And both couples slowly started to cut themselves two pieces of cake.

Robert Kincaid was there to capture everything on film. The two grooms held a small piece of cake in their hands while the two brides held a much larger piece in theirs.

They had decided earlier to take turns so Robert could get pictures of both couples eating the cake. Melissa and Rick went first. Rick slowly and gracefully slid the small piece of cake between Melissa’s lips. Melissa, on the other hand, had other ideas. As she slowly placed the cake between her husband’s lips, without warning, she suddenly cramped the entire piece of

cake deep into his mouth. Rick knew that she was going to do it. He just knew. But the result still left Rick with cake all over his face. Rick and Melissa kissed each other.

Mike just looked at Katie. “Now be nice, sweetheart,” he told her.

“Oh, I intend to. after all I’m not your sister, I’m your wife,” she said as she slowly raised the cake up to his mouth and slowly slid it between his lips. Mike, however, wasn’t moving as fast as Rick had. Just as Katie went to force the piece of cake into his mouth, Mike did the same to her. Both of them ended up with cake on their faces.

“That was mean,” Katie said half laughing as she tried not to get any cake on her dress.

“Hey, do unto others before they have a chance to do unto you, right?” Mike asked her.

“Oh, you just wait, buddy boy. Your turn is coming,” she answered. Mike took his wife into his arms and kissed her. The onlookers of townspeople all started laughing and clapping. “I know. That’s what I’m waiting for,” Mike whispered in her ear.

“Well, you might be waiting a lot longer than you think,” she said laughing.

“Really?” he asked her.

“Oh yeah, really,” she said still laughing.

Melissa took another piece of cake in her hand and held it up next to her brother’s face.

“Oh, brother dear,” she called him.

As he turned around to see what she wanted, Melissa pushed the piece of cake into his face. Mike was in total shock. He couldn’t believe that his sister had nailed him so damn easily.

“That, my dear brother, is for messing up Katie’s makeup,” she proudly told him. Katie was laughing her ass off. She couldn’t believe that Mike had been so stupid to turn around in the first place.

Melissa turned to look at her husband's reaction just in time to see a piece of cake crashing into her face. "That's for messing with Mike," Rick told her. Now Mike was laughing at his sister. Katie was laughing at everything.

"All right, you clowns, that's enough. You all keep this up, and there won't be any cake for our guests," Grady told them.

"But, Daddy, we haven't gotten Rick yet. I mean it hardly sounds fair not to spread the cake around evenly," Katie pleaded with him.

"I'm sorry, but I guess Rick gets a break here," he answered.

"That's not fair, Grady. You just wait, Rick. When you least expect it, expect it!" Melissa told him.

"I don't know if I should thank you or curse you, Grady," Rick said with a smile.

"Well, before this day is over, you might be doing both, son," he replied.

Katie just stopped and looked at the cake. "Now how in the world did they do that?" she asked.

Everyone stopped and looked at what Katie was looking at. In all of their nonsense, they had been too busy stuffing the cake into each other's face to notice the hidden beauty within the cake. The cake itself was a white cake, but baked into the middle of the cake was a red outline of a heart done in some other cake mix. The heart ran all the way through the cake. So no matter where you cut it, your piece of cake had a heart in it. "My God, that's simply breathtaking, isn't it?" Melissa asked.

"I've never seen anything like it before. Whoever baked this cake is a wizard in the kitchen," Katie added.

While they were busy admiring the cake, Paul moved the microphone to the edge of the dance floor in front of the main tables that was reserved for the two married couples, their parents, and those in the wedding party. Right off of that table, another reserved table was set up for the governor, his wife, and their fellow dignitaries.

Grady walked up to the microphone that was wired to every speaker that had been hung around Matterson House and the seating area. "Excuse me, please. If I could please have your attention, please?" he said as most of the people turned to listen to him. "On behalf of the newly married couples and their families, I'd like to welcome each and everyone of you to our home. Words will never express just how grateful we all are for your unfounded response, your support, and for everything that you the people of Mattersonville have done to make this ceremony what it is. You will forever be in our hearts. But for now, we ask that you join us in celebrating the marriages of these two couples. There's plenty of food, and there should still be enough cake left for everyone. The band will be playing music throughout the day and into the night. You're all invited to celebrate with us just as long as you want to. There's no time limit here.

"If you haven't noticed, we have some very important guests here today. And I'm not talking about the governor and his wife or the two senators or the three congressmen. No, the very important guest that I'm referring to is you. Each and every one of you are just as important as the governor today. So again, let me welcome you to our home. So please let the party continue," he said. There was a large outburst of applause from the crowd.

The two newly wed couples slowly made their way to their table and took their seats, followed by their parents, and everyone in the wedding party.

Just as they were seated, the governor himself stepped up to the microphone. Everyone stopped what they were doing to listen to what he had to say. "Hello, everyone, my name is George Wilson, and I am your governor," he said before he paused for a few seconds. The audience went wild with cheers and clapping. "First off, I'd like to offer a heartfelt congratulations to all of the newlyweds. May your lives together be just as exciting as this day is for you, and may you wake up more in love with each other than you did when you feel asleep.

"But to all of you, the people of Mattersonville, my hat goes off to you. I've been told that every residence here donated their time, their money, and so much more to make everything that you see here possible. This is just

amazing. To think that a small town like Mattersonville, Georgia, could do something for one of their own. Now that's southern hospitality at its best. You all deserve a hardy round of applause for your hard work and your very generous donations," he said as he started clapping, and then everyone at the wedding table stood up and started clapping, and with that, everyone was clapping and cheering. It lasted almost three minutes. As the cheering and the clapping slowly receded, the governor continued. "But I owe all of you an apology. Sometimes in the world of politics, you miss the little things. And I'm sorry to say that's exactly what I did. I missed you. Several weeks ago, I received a letter from Washington telling me that the treasure of the South had been found here in Mattersonville. But frankly, I have to admit. I didn't know you were here. Never heard the name of Mattersonville before that day. But now, suddenly almost overnight, every memo, every letter mentions Mattersonville in one way or another.

"Now you can say that the people who made the discovery here are responsible for this sudden interest in your great little town, and for the most part, you would be right. But as you may or may not know, this giant house that you see behind you is soon to be a national historic site, and the entire grounds are now a national park. So in the near future, Americans by the carload will be visiting Mattersonville, Georgia, to see these new parks. And trust me, they will come. But it will be your generous southern hospitality, just like you've showed us here today, that will be responsible for bringing them back again and again. And that makes me proud to be an American. And I'm mighty proud to be the governor of the great state of Georgia. God bless America and God bless the great state of Georgia, and most of all, God bless all of you. And I make this promise to all of you, I will never forget you again. Thank you," He said as he stepped away from the microphone.

The crowd erupted into a frenzy of applause and whistles that lasted a very long time. The governor then walked over to the wedding table and shook each of their hands. Katie and Melissa had tears in their eyes—again.

All around the outer rim of activities, there were fires burning as volunteers slaved to prepare enough food to feed this robust crowd that had gathered there for this event. The volunteers had been there long before

sunrise preparing and cooking a wide assortment of food. And it was the smell of all that great food cooking that filled the air. There was never a rush on any one serving center, but there was a very steady flow of people that took their turn at getting some of the great food, and soon the massive rows of tables started filling up as everyone sat down to eat. The musicians continued to play as everyone ate.

Katie glanced down toward the end of the table to where Bobby and Katie were sitting side by side eating. She just smiled at them. *What a cute little couple those two made*, she thought to herself.

Nobody made any more speeches for the next hour or so as everyone enjoyed the best food in the entire state of Georgia. And the cake, that beautiful great big cake, well, let's just say that it was almost gone.

Grady walked up behind Katie. "Here, this is for Rick," he said into her ear. Katie looked down at her daddy's hand. It was a fairly large piece of cake. Rick, who was sitting next to Katie, was busy talking to Melissa and never thought for one minute that he was about to receive his just reward.

"Oh, Rick dear," Katie said as she held the piece of cake at face level.

"Yes, Katie?" he said as he turned around to see what she wanted only to have the cake hit him square in the face.

"That's for messing up Melissa' makeup!" she said as she pressed the piece of cake into his face.

Melissa started laughing her ass off. Rick didn't say anything. What could he say? Katie had gotten back at him fair and square. Everyone in the crowd was clapping and whistlin'. Grady handed both of them a damp towel.

Rick just looked at Katie. "Touché, Katie, I knew that it was coming, but I didn't know when or how," he told her.

"Well, I guess you know now. Don't ya?" she asked as she gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Yeah, I guess I do at that," he said with a smile as he finished wiping the cake from his face.

“I think you should have used a bigger piece of cake,” Mike told Katie.

“I was planning on it, but Daddy didn’t know my plan, I guess. Anyways, Rick got his just desserts anyhow,” Katie answered. Katie signaled for her daddy to come over to her.

“What’s up dear?” he asked her.

“Can you hand me the microphone please. It does come off of that stand, doesn’t it?” she asked.

“Well, I think so. I’ll check. Give me a minute, okay?” he told her.

“Okay, Daddy, and thanks for the cake. He had it coming,” she told him. Grady just smiled at her as he hurried off to fetch her the microphone. A few minutes later, Katie stood up with the microphone in her tiny hands. The crowd grew quiet as they waited for her to speak.

“Hello, everyone, my name is Katie Windslow and—” she stopped as Mike tugged on her dress. She glanced down at him and realized her mistake. “Am sorry everyone. My name is Katie Gibbes. I guess that’s something that I’ll just have to get used to, isn’t it? Anyways, as I stand here in this beautiful dress and I look out at you and I see thousands of faces, I realized that I am very blessed to have each and every one of you as my friend. And while I may not know your names, you still have a place in my heart. And I do mean that seriously. You will never know what I felt when I first saw all of this today from my seat up in that carriage. My heart felt like it was about to explode. Really. You know, throughout my life, I’ve always believed that you get more out of life when you give to others. And all of you here today have shown me that I was right. A little kindness toward your fellow man will only return to reward you ten times over. And that’s exactly what happened here today. But there are a few people here today that I would like to thank personally if I may.

“All of this and all of your sacrifices would have never happened if it wasn’t for the unselfish ideas of a very close friend. She came up with idea in her head and don’t ask me why ’cause I really don’t know, but she came up with this idea in her head, and she took that idea to the mayor who in turn took it to the town council, and well, the rest is history, isn’t it? Remember what I said about it coming back to you ten times over? Well

now it's her turn. Susie Barnes, where are you? Well, stand up so everyone can see ya, dear," she said as she waited for her to stand up. Susie slowly stood up.

"Let's all give her a big Georgia round of applause. I think she deserves it," Katie said as the crowd erupted. When the crowd finished, Katie continued. "And then there's this lady that I've come to admire. You see, these dresses that Melissa and I are wearing. She sewed these gowns by hand, just for us. And if you ladies want to know what it really feels like to feel like a queen, you should try on one of her dresses. Violet, where are you, dear?" Katie asked, and Vi stood up.

"Let's hear it for her," Katie said as the crowd erupted again. "And then there's these two people who entered our lives just a few weeks ago, but through their undying devotion to all of us and to my late Uncle Jack, they have earned the title of aunt and uncle, but not only from me but from all of us as well. They were responsible for those magnificent horse-drawn carriages that we rode in today. Uncle Paul, Aunt Mary, where are you? There you are. Come on, stand up!" Katie yelled. Once they stood up, the crowd automatically went wild.

"There's so many more people that I would love to thank, but I'd be up here all night. But to the governor and your beautiful wife and the senators and congressmen that made it here today, to say that we're honored, well, I guess that would go without saying now, wouldn't it? Thank you all for being here today. You will never know what it means to all of us here today to have you all here. Really.

"But the list goes on and on and on. My daddy who put up with me for the last twenty years. You know that we all love you. To my Aunt Elizabeth and my cousin Katie, we all owe you so much. And we all love you so much more.

"But there is one more person that I need to give thanks to.

"There's a certain gentleman here today that some of you may know. Some of you may not. But by the end of the day, I know that you'll love him just as much as I do. I met this guy one night outside the movie house where he proceeded to sweep me off of my feet. And from that very second,

I knew that he was the one. He has charmed his way into my life and into my heart. And I even got a nice addition to my life in the form of his sister. She is my very best friend in the entire world next to God himself of course. But this guy, he's just the greatest thing to ever happen in my life. And without him, none of this would have been possible. Would you like to meet him?" Katie asked the crowd as they went wild again.

"Then let me introduce you to him. His name is Michael Gibbes. Where are you?" Katie said as she looked out among the crowd. Michael stood up next to her. She turned to face him. "Oh, there you are, tricky little thing, ain't ya?" she said as she acted as if she was surprised to see him standing next to her.

"Everyone I'd like you to meet the love of my life, my brand-new husband, Michael," Katie said as she dropped the microphone and hugged her husband. They pressed their lips together in a very passionate embrace. Everyone was cheering and clapping, especially everyone seated at the wedding table.

Melissa reached over and picked up the microphone. As she stood before the audience, everyone got quite again. "Wow, I don't know if I can even hope to compete with that, so I won't even try to. But I do have to agree with Katie on one point. And that would be how I felt when I first saw everything that you have all done for us here today. I too was overwhelmed with emotions when I first saw everything. But what really caught my eye was the mere number of people that chose to make it out here today. It's just more than I ever thought possible. And it's funny because just the other day, Katie and I were talking, and she mentioned that fact that she didn't think that she had that many friends. Boy, was she mistaken," she said as the crowd before her all started laughing.

"But seriously, we all have friends, and after today, I think we both might need a bigger address book." The crowd started laughing again.

You all have done so much for us, and I will never find the words that express to you all just how grateful we all are for everything that you all have done here. We love all of you, and you'll all be added to our prayer

lists. Of course, with a prayer list this long, we all might have to go to bed a few hours earlier just so we have time to read our list.

“But to the governor, I really do need to apologize to you, dear sir. It would seem that I might have, well, voted for the other guy,” she said as the crowd started laughing again. “What was that?” she asked the governor. “She turned back to the crowd. “For those of you that couldn’t hear him, the governor told me that we all make mistakes. Well, sir, I won’t next time. If nothing else comes out of all of this, at least you’ve earned my vote,” Melissa said as the crowd laughed again.

“But seriously, I’m so lucky to be living in the greatest country in the world, in the greatest state in the nation. But most of all, I’m blessed to be living in the town of Mattersonville, Georgia. For only here in this small little town that’s hidden away from the rest of the world could you ever hope to find the love that we all share between us. And if you want to hear something that sounds like music to my ears, listen to this—Melissa Marie McIntosh. Ain’t that the sweetest thing that you’ve ever heard? Simply beautiful! God bless you all and thank you again,” she said as she quietly sat down. Again the crowd went wild.

Michael stood up next and reached over toward his sister and picked up the microphone.

“Now answer me this. Everyone, have you ever seen two more beautiful women than these two here?” Mike said as he pointed at Katie and his sister. “Now I don’t know about Rick here, but I have to be the luckiest guy in the world right about now,” he said as everyone cheered.

“But there is one guy here that has been up to now, a lot luckier than I ever was. You see, this guy had the privilege of watching this beautiful lady here grow up from the cutest little girl and into this glamorous young lady that you see before you. And I even have proof of just how cute and charming she was as a little girl. Would you all like to see what Katie looked like as a ten-year-old girl?” he asked.

The crowd cheered. “Okay, in one second, but first let me explain something to all of you. This is not a trick. Your eyes are not playing tricks on you. What you are about to see is real,” Mike told the crowd as he

looked down at little Katie. “Come on over here, Katie, stand next to your cousin so everyone can see you,” he told her. Both Katies stood side by side and laughed as they stared out into the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to introduce you to Katie’s ten-year-old cousin, Katie. Yeah, you heard me right. Her name is Katie Windslow too. Ain’t this like looking at past and present at the same time.

“And this pretty little thing here is what our host had the privilege of looking at each and every day. God, just how lucky can a guy be. And yet this guy has a sense of humor that will catch you totally off guard if you’re not expecting it. He’s grown into one of my closest friends, and now he’s my father-in-law. Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to introduce you all to Katie’s father, my new father-in-law and your host for today, Mr. Grady Windslow, but he prefers to be called Grady. Grady, can you please come up here,” Mike said as Grady made his way over to the microphone. The entire crowd was cheering as Grady took the mic from Michael’s hand.

“Thank you, everyone. You’re all so very kind. But I’m not going to stand up here and give another speech. There’s something that we really need to do first. If we can get every single woman to stand here on the dance floor in front of the brides, it’s time for the brides to toss their bouquets. So if you’re single and a female, no matter what age, you all can have a chance at catching one of the brides’ bouquets.

As a very large crowd of single women started to line up on the dance floor in front of the table where the brides were seated, Katie and Melissa stood up with their bouquets in their hands. Katie told Melissa to go first. So Melissa turned her back to the crowd, and as she closed her eyes, she tossed the large bouquet over her head and out into the crowd. It was a very good toss, and the bouquet soared high up into air—well, into the crowd just about twenty or so feet back. Now, there’s no way of telling just how many hands touched it before it landed into the open arms of the final woman that would lay claim to it. Melissa turned around to see who had caught her bouquet. To much of her surprise Susie Barnes stepped forward holding the bouquet in her hands. Katie and Melissa started clapping, and the entire crowd soon joined them. Now it was Katie’s turn.

Katie turned her back to the crowd. She closed her eyes and concentrated on throwing her bouquet far into the crowd of waiting and wanting hands. As she tossed her bouquet high above her head, everyone watched as it soared through the air. And just as it was about to make its descent into the crowd, a single hand reached up and, in an attempt to grab it, swatted the bouquet down into the waiting arms of her little cousin Katie.

Katie's mouth opened in astonishment. She couldn't believe that she had been lucky enough to have caught her cousin's bouquet. Katie turned around to see who had caught hers. She was shocked to see her cousin clenching the bouquet in her hands.

And from the sidelines a voice rang out where everyone could hear it. "Yes!" was all that it said. Everyone turned to see Bobby standing there celebrating Katie's feat. He looked up to see everyone staring at him.

"What? I'm just happy for her, that's all," Bobby told the crowd of onlookers. Everyone started clapping. Now whether they were clapping for Katie or at Bobby, that would never be known for certain. But little Katie didn't care. She had her cousin's bouquet, and to her, nothing else mattered.

The two brides and the two bouquet catchers posed for pictures, and they all hugged each other.

Paul walked up to the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, if I could please ask for everyone to clear the dance floor, and if I could please get all of the newlyweds to step out onto the dance floor, I would appreciate it," he said as the crowd started to clear the dance floor.

The two couples of newlyweds stood out on the dance floor as Paul approached them.

"Life is a series of dances. Some will be a waltz while others will require a lot more. So I ask that all of you join with us in celebrating the union of love between these two couples as they dance their very first dance as husband and wife. May your lives together be as smooth as your very first dance," He told them as he signaled for the music to begin.

Everyone on that dance floor knew what song they would be dancing to. Everyone except for Katie, that is. And as the musicians started playing,

Katie could feel her heart grow by leaps and bounds as she recognized the song. They were all dancing to the song that Michael had played for her in that jukebox back in the soda shop. Michael looked at Katie.

“Hey, they’re playing our song,” he told her.

“I know. God, how I love you, Michael,” she told him as she buried her face against his chest.

“I love you too, dear. After all, you are indeed truly ‘Unforgettable,’” he told her as he pulled her into him.

And the two couples danced their way across the dance floor as the crowd looked on. There wasn’t a dry eye in the entire crowd or on the dance floor.

As their first dance finished, the musicians went right into the second song. It too was a slow-moving ballet. Bobby took little Katie by the hand and led her out onto the dance floor. As they started dancing, Katie saw them and signaled over to Melissa. Both couples slowly made their way to the sidelines and yielded the dance floor to Bobby and Katie. And neither of them ever knew that they were the focus of everyone’s attention. That was until the music slowly ended, and the crowd started cheering. Katie and Bobby just looked around as they realized that they were the only couple out on the dance floor. Bobby’s face turned beet-red, but Katie just gave everyone a curtsy before she and Bobby left the dance floor.

As the music started again, everyone started dancing. Katie and Melissa danced the next dance with their fathers as Mike and Rick danced theirs with their mothers. After that, it was an open dance floor. And for the next several hours, Katie and Melissa danced with what would appear to be every man in Mattersonville. Just as Mike and Rick danced with several of the town’s women.

But out of all the dances that Katie danced, none could be any more important or rewarding than the dances that she enjoyed with the three guys from the cave. It meant a lot to Katie, just knowing that her little bit of kindness had inspired these guys to make such a drastic change in their lives. It would prove to be one of her greatest acts of kindness.

It was well past two in the morning before the last of the guests finally left. Little Katie had long ago passed out, and Paul had taken her up to her room so Mary could put the very tired and worn-out little girl to bed. In her hand, was Katie's bouquet. She refused to let it go.

Outside as everyone sat around a table, Grady poured each of them a glass of champagne. Katie and Melissa didn't object, but they threw each other a cautious look.

"Here's to a life of love, honor, and respect. May you always have plenty of each to carry you through," Grady said as he held his glass out.

"Cheers," they all said as they gently banged their glasses together before downing the bubbly beverage.

"Wow, what a day!" Elizabeth said as she looked at the mess before them.

"Yeah, no kidding. But I don't think we've could have asked for a more perfect day," Mary added.

"Yeah, I have to agree. And even when you consider the sheer number of people that showed up, everything worked out just fine," Paul added.

Grady refilled their glasses again. Grady was about to make another toast as Katie interrupted him.

"Daddy, if I may?" she asked him.

"Why, certainly, Katie, by all means go ahead," he responded.

Katie stood up with her glass in her hand. "Here's to family, friends, and the people that mean the most to you, for without them, you have nothing," Katie said as she held out her glass.

"Here, here, I'll drink to that," Michael said as he put his arm around Katie's waist.

"Cheers," they all said together as they downed the contents of their glasses.

"So have you all decided on a honeymoon spot yet?" Elizabeth asked them.

They all looked at Rick. "Go ahead, tell them. After all, it was your idea," Mike told him.

Rick just looked at everyone at the table. "Well, I thought that we would take the advise of one of our friends and just go. Go see America. We have two weeks before Melissa has to be back at school, so we should be able to see a lot," he told them.

"I think that's a grand idea," Grady replied.

"Where do you plan on going?" Paul asked.

"Well, California for starters, and then we'll just work our way back. There's a lot to see, and we want to see as much of it as possible," Mike added.

Katie looked over at her daddy. She saw a tear run down his cheek.

"Daddy, are you crying?" she asked him.

"Naw, not me. But I just realized that this will be the very first time that we'll be apart. It's hard to believe that you're all grown up now. You've got a great husband, and I suspect sooner or later, you'll have a family of your own too," he told her.

"Yeah, but I'll always be your little girl. Remember?" she asked.

"Yeah, and I'll never forget it either," he said as he hugged his daughter.

Katie and Michael turned and walked off toward the barn, hand in hand and heart in heart.

Michael looked at Katie. Love was in his eyes. "So how does my new bride feel now? I mean considerin' the outpouring of support from our friends and family. I mean it was a spectacular ceremony, wasn't it?" he asked her.

"Yes, it was at that, but it was a combination of everything that has happened in the past months or so. I mean, with the discovery of the treasure right down to those three guys in the cave. It all adds up to one beautiful story, doesn't it?" she asked him.

“Yes, my dear Katie, it certainly does at that. The perfect love story that ends with us getting married,” he told her.

“Michael, while our wedding is the high point and the perfect ending to a perfect story, the story must go on. Every day that we wake up, we’ll find new challenges to face and new hurdles to get over. But if we haven’t learned anything else, we’ll have to remember everything that had to happen to bring us to where we are today,” she told him.

“I agree with you, dear. It was a combination of things that came together one piece at a time, and the finished puzzle was a picture of us falling in love,” he told her.

“Yeah, that is a pretty good ending, isn’t it? But think of all of the sacrifices that had to be endured along the way just so the story would all end up with us here. The Civil War, the slaves, the theft, the secrets, it all plays together. And I wonder what tomorrow will bring,” she told him.

“Katie, tomorrow will come, and it will go. We’ll learn from our mistakes and make new ones. That’s how life works. I’m just lucky enough to spend tomorrow and all of the days that will follow in love with you,” he told her.

“You’re so sweet, Michael. But I just have to wonder if in our lifetime, will we ever see the end of racism? Will little Katie grow up into a world where a person isn’t judged solely on the color of their skin. Will our kids, when we have them, learn that it’s so much better to give than it is to receive. Don’t get me wrong, sweetheart, I’m glad that I met you, and I love the way that you love me, but I wonder about the future,” she told him.

“Katie dear, you’re Katie Windslow despite the name change. You’ll always be Katie Windslow. I know that, and so do you. And that, my love, will give our kids and little Katie too an advantage over everyone else’s kids. Your faith in God and your faith in yourself is more than enough to see us through. And through your undying love, you’ll pass everything that makes you onto our kids. And who knows one of them just might make their mark in this world and maybe become the president or something,” he told her.

“That would be nice I suppose. But if they just grew up and believed in their fellow man and in God above, I would be grateful for that.

“Well, so much for pondering on the things that we can’t control. What do you say we wander on over to the barn, and say, check the horses?” she asked him.

He looked at her and smiled. “But what about your dress?” he asked her.

“What about it? All you have to be concerned about, my dear sir, is the fact that there’s no hoop skirt under there. In fact, the only thing you’ll find under this dress is me—your friend, your lover, and your wife. And I can’t think of anything else that I’d rather be doing right about now,” she told him.

“Well then, since you put it that way,” he answered as he led her off to the barn.

# The End Or Is It just the Beginning?

Time would pass slowly at Matterson House. There was a lot of good times as well as a few bad times. Elizabeth, despite what the doctors had told her, lived for another eleven years. And even though her cancer made her weak at times, she was there to see her daughter graduate high school and go on to become Bobby's wife. She died in her sleep in late August 1966. She was buried next to her husband, Jack, at Matterson House. Little Katie still talks to her mom and father often.

Bobby joined the United States Marine Corps after graduating high school. He served three complete tours of duty in Vietnam. But while in his final week of his fourth tour, he was killed by a sniper's bullet in the summer of '73. He was laid to rest at Matterson House with full military honors. Everyone cried.

Susie Barnes went on to marry the manager of the movie house. She's the proud mother of three and is still Katie and Melissa's friend.

Paul and Mary remained as everyone's aunt and uncle. Neither of them have ever married.

Grady is still running Matterson House. Over fifty thousand people visit the national park every year. One month after the wedding, Grady received a large crate that he wasn't expecting. After opening it, he was shocked and surprised to find a large bust of his brother, Jack. It was centered between the busts of two horse heads. One horse was looking to the right while the other looked to the left. It was done in solid brass. Below the three figures was affixed a bronze plaque that read,

"We shall never forget how he lived here nor shall we ever forget how they died here."

Jack "Rings" Windslow, Proud Sponsor of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

This is what they had used the reward money that they had received for finding the Lost Treasure of the South. Grady put the statue next to the growing cemetery at Matterson House. It was a fitting tribute to his brother.

Melissa finished her last year of college before taking the job with the government. To her credit, over ten thousand pieces of American history have been recovered so far. And Rick was at her side every step of the way.

Katie and Mike stayed on at Matterson House where Katie soon became a favorite tour guide. Through thick and thin, Mike and Katie never left each other's side. In the spring of '62, Katie gave birth to their only child. They named him Jack.

Life goes on . . . one day at a time. So whenever you see something that looks out of place or something that you just can't explain, it might prove to be worth checking out. Especially something as simple as a gopher hole. It may very well prove to be the treasure of a lifetime . . . or maybe you'll just find gophers.

*Hey, you'll never know . . . Or will ya?*

**THE END**